

STAR
WARS™

STAR WARS™

Galaxy of Fear

Volume Two

John Whitman



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Galaxy of Fear: The Brain Spiders
Galaxy of Fear: The Swarm
Galaxy of Fear: Spore
Galaxy of Fear: The Doomsday Ship
Galaxy of Fear: Clones
Galaxy of Fear: The Hunger
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Galaxy of Fear

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For my wife, Lisa, who always rescues me.

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Prologue

In the middle of a wide chamber sat a high table. A tray next to it was covered with sharp metal instruments.

On the table, a man struggled desperately, but his arms and legs were held down with unbreakable straps.

Several figures glided out of the shadows. One of them wore a long brown robe that hid his face.

"Is everything ready?" he asked.

Another nodded. "We can begin."

The first figure pulled back the sleeves of his long brown robe and from the tray picked up a wicked-looking blade.

"Please," said the man on the table. "I didn't do anything. Let me go!"

The figure in the brown robe did not respond.

"I'm begging you," the man pleaded again. "I didn't do anything. Please don't hurt me!"

The dark figure smiled. "Hurt you? You don't understand. I am not going to hurt you. I am going to show you the mysteries of the universe." He held up the sharp blade, which had many jagged sawlike teeth, and nodded to his companion. "All right, let's remove his brain."

Chapter One

"Welcome to Koda Spaceport. Welcome——*zzzzzz* to Koda *Spzzzzzz* port..."

The hospitality droid was programmed for one simple task—to welcome visitors to Koda Space Station. But one of those visitors had fired a blaster shot through the droid's main computer, frying its circuits. The tall, humanoid droid shuffled back and forth in the huge gateway, repeating his welcome over and over again.

Tash and Zak Arranda, along with their uncle Hoole, stood at the entrance to the spaceport.

"I can't believe no one's even bothered to fix him," Zak said sympathetically.

Tash looked past the droid into the passageway beyond. Blaster burns and scrawled graffiti covered the walls. Trash littered the floor. She couldn't tell exactly what kind of trash it was, but from the smell, she guessed it was old food, spilled drinks, and other things she didn't want to think about. "Looks like no one's bothered to fix a lot of things around here."

Hoole frowned. The lines on his long, gray face deepened. "I did not suspect Koda would be in such a state of disrepair. Still, it is a busy port, and a good place to hide. Let's proceed."

John Whitman

The tall Shi'ido led them past the shuffling droid and into the spaceport.

Koda was a tiny, insignificant spaceport in a small, backwater corner of the galaxy. The nearby planets were sparsely inhabited by a few poor settlements. The only people who came to Koda were local farmhands looking for excitement and bored smugglers looking for trouble.

"Stay close to me," Hoole ordered his niece and nephew.

Zak glanced back down the hall at the damaged droid. He sighed. "I miss Deevee."

Tash nodded. "I do, too. But he's happier now."

DV-9 had been their uncle's research droid. He had also been Tash and Zak's caretaker and friend. The droid had been heavily damaged during some recent adventures. They had been able to repair him, but Deevee told them, "I believe I've had all the excitement my servos can take."

Hoole had agreed to free the droid from service. It wasn't fair to keep dragging him around the galaxy——especially since they were still wanted by the Empire. With Tash and Zak's help, Hoole had been able to destroy a secret scientific experiment run by the Empire. Unfortunately, their victory had also made them a terrible enemy: Darth Vader. Zak, Tash, and Hoole had managed to escape his clutches, but now they were on the run, wanted in every star system in the galaxy.

All this was too much for the damaged droid. Deevee had retired to the Galactic Research Facility on the planet Koan.

"I wish I was with Deevee now," Zak muttered as they waded through the trash-covered hallway.

"Oh, don't be such a baby," Tash said. "A little garbage won't kill you."

Tash saw her younger brother scowl at her. She shrugged. Lately, he'd seemed awfully immature to her. After all, she was

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thirteen heading toward fourteen—and he was only twelve, not even a true teenager yet.

"Anyway, we've been through worse," Tash went on confidently. "This place is nothing *we* can't handle. Right, Uncle Hoole?"

"Wrong."

Hoole had just stopped at the entrance to the spaceport's cantina. It was made of a hard, see-through material called transparisteel. On the far side of the entryway, they could hear screams, shouts, and laughter mixed with the sounds of glasses shattering and furniture smashing. Something—Tash couldn't tell if it was a very large person or a very large couch—banged into the transparisteel door like it had been thrown by a giant.

Zak started to speak. "It's like——"

"——the end of the world," Tash interrupted.

"Yeah," he agreed.

"No, look," she said, pointing at the sign on the door. "This place is *called* 'The End of the World.' "

"Aptly named," Hoole said. "This is the worst-run establishment I've ever seen. Even more dangerous than a cantina I once visited on Tatooine. I think you two should return to the ship."

"Why?" Tash objected.

Hoole turned his steady gaze on his niece. "Tash, I need to make sure there is no Imperial activity at this spaceport. I also need to decide what our next move will be. A cantina like this is the best place to acquire information. However, it is not the best place for children."

"Children!" Tash blurted out. "Uncle Hoole, we're not kids and we've been through worse than this."

Hoole paused. It was true. Tash and Zak had been through some frightening adventures. But all that was behind them now. There was no need to take unnecessary risks.

"Please return to the ship. I will meet you there shortly," he said. Then he turned and walked into the End of the World.

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"Okay by me," Zak said. "I'm about ready for things to get back to normal, anyway." He motioned to Tash. "What do you say we go back to the ship and play a few holo-games. I might even let you win at Starbattle!"

Tash frowned. "Hologames are for kids," she grumbled, and quickly followed Hoole into the noisy gloom of the cantina.

Tash blinked as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. She hadn't meant to snap at Zak like that—he was her best friend. But lately she'd started to feel, well, *older* than her brother. After all, she would be fourteen in a few weeks. Also, she had recently become aware of her sensitivity to the Force, the mysterious power used by the ancient Jedi Knights.

Squinting, Tash searched for Hoole, but the cantina was so dark that she could barely see where she was going. Besides, Hoole was a Shi'ido, and the Shi'ido were shapechangers. The moment he stepped into the dark bar, Hoole could have transformed into any shape in the galaxy.

The only real light leaked out of a row of tiny lamps over the squid-shaped head of the bartender. Tash saw many humans lined up at the bar, as well as a few alien species. There was a long-snouted Kubaz, a small group of pudgy Kitonaks, and a horn-headed Devaronian. But most of the customers seemed happier hiding in the shadows.

A bulky figure sitting at a nearby table suddenly let out a deep sigh, and Tash found herself engulfed in a cloud of smelly t'bac smoke.

"Hey!" she said without thinking. "You blew that smoke right in my face!"

She threw an angry glance in the direction of the smoker, and found herself looking into the ugliest face she had ever seen. One of the smoker's eyes was wide and bloodshot, but the other was so flat and squinty that it looked as if one side of his face had been crushed by a gravity well. His nose was wide and flat, and it bent in two different directions as it grew down from his forehead. His mouth was twisted into a permanent snarl. He had

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no neck—just two huge, sloping shoulders and a pair of arms thicker than Tash's waist.

"Yeah, I did," the smoker agreed with a growl. He blew another cloud of smoke that made Tash cough.

"Stop it!"

Slowly, the smoker stood up. He was almost as tall as a Wookiee. He leered down at Tash. "Who's going to make me, little girl?"

"I——" Tash swallowed. She knew she should just back off, but she hated being called *little girl*. "I will," she said weakly.

The bar fell silent. Everyone waited to see what the huge being would do.

The smoker looked at Tash again, then threw back his head and let loose a roar of laughter. Tash felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment. When the creature was done laughing, he put one huge hand on her head. Then he bent down to look her in the eye.

"Little girl, I would eat you for lunch if you were big enough to make a meal. You're lucky Drudo found me someone else to eat. Now run along before I decide to have an appetizer."

He spun Tash around so she was facing the opposite direction, then gave her a gentle shove that sent her stumbling across the dark cantina toward the exit. A ripple of laughter followed her.

When she regained her balance, Tash fumed. She didn't care how big that bully was—he didn't have the right to embarrass her.

She walked up to the bartender. "I want to see the owner."

The squid-headed bartender blubbered something in a thick, liquid- sounding language. It sounded like laughter. Then he said in Basic, "He's in the back room. But you don't want to disturb him. He's not in a very good mood."

"Yes, I do," Tash said stubbornly. The smoker had insulted her, but she decided to handle the situation like an adult. She would register a complaint with the management.

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She strode over to a door next to the bar and stepped through as it slid open.

Tash found herself in a small, brightly lit room. A man in a white apron stood with his back to her, working over a table.

"Excuse me," she said.

"It's not ready!" the man yelled, whirling around.

As he did, Tash saw that the table was covered in blood. Then she looked at the man's hands. In one hand he held a blood-stained vibroblade. In the other he held a still-beating heart.

Chapter Two

The man stuck the throbbing heart in Tash's face and snapped, "Is this what you want?"

Tash jumped back in surprise and terror, trying to shut the horrible sight from her eyes and the smell from her nose. "No!" she shrieked.

The man blinked and looked at Tash again. "Wait a minute. You're not a Whiphid."

"No, I'm not," Tash said, her own heart pounding faster as the one in the stranger's hand began to slow. "I-I'm Tash."

The man grunted. "Sorry. Thought you were one of those Whiphid brats. There's a family of 'em in the cantina. Been pounding the tables asking for their meal for the last half hour." He jabbed his blade at the pile of guts on the table. "Whiphids are born hunters. Only like fresh meat."

Glancing at the table again, Tash realized that the blood and body parts belonged to a slaughtered nerf, not a sentient being. *Not that that makes things much better*, she thought, shuddering at the sight of the animal's remains. But at least she knew the manager wasn't some kind of mass murderer.

The man plopped the heart on the table and wiped his hand on his smock. "Name's Drudo. I run the End of the World. Wha'd'ya want?"

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Tash took a deep breath. "I was in your cantina when a big man with a smashed face blew smoke at me. Then he threatened me. I want you to throw him out."

Drudo laughed almost as loudly as the bully had. He stabbed the blade down into the table so that it stuck there, quivering. "Big guy, you said? Smashed face? Was he about this tall?" Drudo stood on his tiptoes and stretched his hand up as high as he could.

"Yes, that's him," Tash replied. She felt more confident. This Drudo was treating her like an adult, and it looked like he was going to help her.

"Can't help ya," Drudo said.

"What?" Tash blurted. "Why not? You own this place, and I'm a customer. That man was rude to me!"

"Listen, kid," Drudo drawled. "You're lucky all he hurt was your ego. You got any idea who he is?"

Tash bristled at the word *kid*, and shook her head.

Drudo went on. "Well, I'll tell you. That there's Karkas, the most wanted criminal in about a hundred light-years. He's got the death sentence in at least two dozen star systems. Everyone—— and I mean *everyone*——wants that guy dead or behind bars. The Rebellion is after him, and so is the Empire. They say he's even wanted by a crime gang called Black Sun. You know how many people he's murdered?"

Again, Tash shook her head.

"Exactly ninety-one," Drudo said, glaring at Tash. "You know how I know?"

"How?" Tash asked.

"Because every time Karkas kills someone, he carves the letter *K* right on their forehead." The cantina owner drew the symbol in the air just millimeters from Tash's face. "Ninety-one times. Kid, that monster would swallow you whole and then forget he'd ever seen you. You're lucky to have walked away with your life."

"I agree," said Hoole.

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Tash jumped. She hadn't seen or heard Hoole enter the room. He could be so quiet, sometimes she thought he floated across the floor.

Hoole put a hand on Tash's shoulder. "I believe I requested that you return to the ship for your own safety."

"Yes, but——" she started to say.

"I apologize for any inconvenience," Hoole said to the cantina owner.

Drudo picked up his knife and started hacking into the organs the Whiphids had ordered for lunch. "No problem. Not like she was keeping me from anything interesting."

Keeping one hand firmly on Tash's shoulder, Hoole escorted her quickly through the cantina and back down the hallway.

"Uncle Hoole, I could have taken care of myself," she insisted as they approached their ship.

"I doubt it," the Shi'ido said sternly. "This is a most dangerous place."

"If it's so dangerous, why did you bring us here?"

The slightest of frowns crossed Hoole's face. "An error. I was hoping to find someone with the skills to help us evade the Empire, but this place is too far out of the main space lanes. No one here has the equipment we need. We'll have to go somewhere else for help. Somewhere I had hoped never to visit again."

"Where?" Tash asked as they boarded the ship.

Hoole barely glanced at her. "To the palace of Jabba the Hutt."

An hour later the *Shroud* was traveling smoothly through hyperspace on its way to the planet of Tatooine. Zak and Tash had been there once before, when Hoole needed a favor from the gangster called Jabba the Hutt. But back then, Tash had been

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preoccupied with other troubles, and she hadn't paid much attention to the planet or its people.

That's because Uncle Hoole always seems to know where we're going, she thought. He's always leading us around...like we were little kids. But I'll bet if I knew more about Tatooine, I could help him.

Activating the computer in her cabin, Tash called up information on the planet Tatooine. There wasn't much. It was a desert planet, a giant ball of dust spinning through space, with only a few small settlements and one busy spaceport called Mos Eisley.

"Still, there's got to be something unique about the place. Otherwise, why would Jabba the Hutt make his home there?" Tash asked herself.

She found a computer file that contained a detailed report on Tatooine. "Aha! I'll bet I can find something here Uncle Hoole doesn't know."

But her hopes were dashed when she saw who had written the report. It was Hoole! He had studied the planet years before and written an eyewitness account of its inhabitants. Tash knew that Hoole was an anthropologist and that it was his job to study different cultures. But there were so many mysteries surrounding her Shi'ido uncle that she'd nearly forgotten he had a job.

"He really *does* study people," she reminded herself. She skimmed the report, but read more closely when she found mention of a group of people called B'omarr monks. They seemed to be religious students, seeking knowledge and trying to understand the mysteries of the universe. Tash wondered if their studies included the Force. Tash was fascinated by the ancient Jedi Knights and the Force that gave them their power. And even though she'd recently learned that the Force was with her, too, she had no one to teach her how to use it.

Now that I'm getting older, she thought, I'll need a teacher. Maybe the B'omarr monks can help.

Reading on, she smiled. Uncle Hoole had called his research work boring, but his report was filled with drama. On Tatooine,

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he had been chased by tribal savages called Sand People and had nearly been captured by Imperial stormtroopers. Wherever Uncle Hoole went, Tash thought, trouble seemed to follow.

ALERT! ALERT! ALERT!

Suddenly, the lights in her cabin went out, and the small red emergency light blinked as alarms blared in her ears. Tash leaped a full meter out of her seat.

That was the collision alert! They were going to crash!

Scrambling to her feet, Tash threw herself at the door. As it slid open, she stumbled out into the hallway to find...Zak, standing in the corridor, laughing hysterically.

There were no alarms in the hallway. No emergency lights.

No crash.

Just Zak, giggling and holding two wires that were connected to a panel in the wall. He had cross-circuited the alarm system in her cabin.

"Gotcha!" he said, tears of laughter rolling down his cheeks.

Tash scowled. "Grow up!" she snapped angrily.

Zak chuckled, but the look on his sister's face took the fun out of his prank. "Hey, it was just a joke."

"Yeah, funny," she said coldly, "if you're in preschool."

She turned and stalked down the hallway toward the cockpit, leaving her brother standing there with his crossed wires.

Tash trudged into the cockpit and slumped down in the copilot's seat. At first, Hoole ignored her as he busily punched commands into the ship's console. Finally, without looking her way, the Shi'ido said, "There was a disturbance back there. What was it?"

Tash gave her head a world-weary shake. "Zak, trying to play an immature joke." She sighed. "Kids."

Hoole glanced at her out of the corner of his dark eye. "Indeed."

Tash waited. When her uncle said nothing more, she added, "Why is he such a child? I mean, by the time I was his age I had already read half the library on Alderaan. Mom and Dad were

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talking about sending me to an academy for advanced students." Tash felt her throat tighten when she mentioned her parents. They had been killed when the Empire destroyed Alderaan, turning Zak and Tash into orphans with one blast of the Death Star's superlaser. "I mean," she went on, "why doesn't he just grow up?"

Hoole turned toward her, his long gray face unreadable. "He is growing up, Tash. In his own way."

"Well, he's sure taking his time about it," she said, looking down at her boots.

The Shi'ido cast a meaningful glance at her, but she missed it. "Perhaps he is in no hurry," Hoole said. "One should never be in a hurry to grow up."

He was about to say more, but a signal from the ship's hyperdrive indicated they were leaving hyperspace. They had arrived at Tatooine.

Hoole took the ship smoothly to sublight drive and steered it toward the giant yellow planet that appeared before them.

"Is it safe for us to visit Tatooine?" Tash asked as the ship entered the hot atmosphere. "We *are* wanted by the Empire, aren't we?"

"Yes," Hoole agreed. "But the Empire is a big place, and news doesn't always travel quickly. Besides, Tatooine is so remote, I doubt the Imperials here would even care about us."

The flight controllers at Mos Eisley gave them permission to land at Docking Bay Ninety-four, and Hoole guided the *Shroud* down to the landing platform. No one had asked them their business, and no Imperial ships had appeared to intercept them. Tash and Hoole met Zak in the corridor.

"You see," Hoole said to his niece, "there's absolutely no danger here."

He opened the hatch. But as he did, a white-armored boot lashed out and kicked him in the stomach. The Shi'ido stumbled backward as five stormtroopers leaped into the ship, their blasters drawn.

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One of the Imperials spoke from behind his armored helmet.
"You are all under arrest."

Chapter Three

A fat Imperial officer waddled into the ship behind the troopers. His brown uniform barely held his belly in place. His chubby cheeks were damp and red from Tatooine's heat, but he managed to look threatening as he raised his blaster.

"Who are you?" the officer asked.

Tash held back a shudder. The Imperials had found them. She tensed, expecting to feel the deadly heat of a blaster bolt at any moment.

Hoole slowly rose to his feet. "I am an anthropologist," the Shi'ido explained without giving his name. "These are my... research assistants."

It was a bad lie, but the stormtrooper hardly noticed. "Where is Karkas?"

"Who?" Hoole asked.

"The criminal," Tash whispered.

The stormtrooper heard her. "Affirmative. He was spotted at the Koda Spaceport and then vanished. Three ships departed the spaceport at the time of his disappearance. Two of the ships, including this one, were tracked on courses for Tatooine. Now, where is he?"

Hoole carefully explained the mistake. They did not know Karkas, and they had certainly not allowed any criminals on

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board their ship. Tash told the officer that she had seen Karkas in the Koda cantina—and that the cantina's owner had told her about the mark Karkas left on his victims—but that they had not seen him since. Hoole concluded, "The fact that our ship left at the same time he disappeared is pure coincidence."

The Imperial official seemed to believe him—but only after his troopers had thoroughly searched the ship and found no sign of Karkas.

"Very well," the officer said. "You are free to go where you wish on Tatooine. But," he said, looking at Tash, "if you spot him again, inform me immediately. Contact the Imperial garrison here and ask for Commander Fuzzel." The officer tried to suck in his round gut as he said, "A good thing for you Karkas was not here. That fugitive has quite a price on his head. When I find him, I intend to make him regret the day he was born. Now, on your way."

Hoole, Zak, and Tash hurried out of the docking bay. Zak cast a nervous glance back over his shoulder. "That was not prime," he said as soon as the Imperials were out of earshot. "We could have ended up in a detention block faster than a Hutt can count credits."

"Indeed," Hoole said without turning around. "Fortunately for us, Commander Fuzzel was more concerned with finding Karkas than with checking our identification."

As they left the docking bay, they had to pass through another checkpoint. But this one was designed to track people leaving the planet. An Imperial soldier waved Hoole and the two Arrandas through as they examined the identification of two departing humans dressed in long brown robes.

"Those are the tallest Jawas I've ever seen," Zak said.

"They are not Jawas," Hoole said. "They are B'omarr monks. It is strange to see them out and about, let alone leaving the planet. The B'omarr monks usually keep to their chambers to study. Come, we must find transportation into the desert."

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They tried to rent a landspeeder from a local merchant. "Five hundred credits," the merchant demanded.

"What?" Zak and Tash gasped.

Hoole glanced back at the Imperial troopers patrolling the town. "Very well," he said.

"But that's way too high," Tash insisted.

"Transports are in high demand," the dealer explained. "The Imperials say there is a lot of criminal activity on Tatooine these days. They take speeders to use in their searches. Then the locals want speeders to avoid the Imperials. Bad news for you, but it keeps me in credits. By the way," the merchant added, "what is your destination?"

Hoole paused. "The palace of Jabba the Hutt."

"In that case, the price is double," the merchant said, lowering his voice. "I've lost too many speeders that way. Visitors go out to Jabba's palace... and they are never seen again."

It took only three hours to ride from Mos Eisley to Jabba's palace, but the trek seemed much longer under the blaze of Tatooine's two suns. Just when Zak and Tash thought they would faint from the heat, Zak spied an enormous castle nestled among the rocks of a dry mountain range.

It was the palace of Jabba the Hutt, the most feared gangster in the galaxy.

Zak and Tash had been here before, but that didn't make them feel any safer. The fortress pulsed with danger. Jabba was as unpredictable as he was powerful. The fact that they had left Jabba's palace unharmed last time meant nothing. Many beings passed through his doors——never to be seen again.

They were admitted by the sentry droids, and then were stopped briefly by two Gamorrean guards——piglike creatures armed with huge axes. As they went on, a Twi'lek appeared out of the darkness. Two wormy tentacles grew out of the back of his head. The Twi'lek had draped the tentacles over his shoulders, and he stroked them thoughtfully as he studied the newcomers.

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"Bib Fortuna," Hoole said, addressing the creature by its name. "I seek a meeting with Jabba."

"You return," Bib Fortuna whispered in a heavy accent. Tash noticed that his teeth were as sharp as fangs. "Perhaps Jabba not so generous with you this time, eh?"

"I'll take that chance," Hoole replied.

Fortuna let out a hiss from between his sharp teeth. Zak and Tash realized he was laughing. "Follow." Then he turned and walked down the corridor as silently as a wraith.

They hurried after Fortuna, who vanished through a round portal. Hoole, Zak, and Tash sped after him. Zak sprinted a little ahead of the others and was about to reach the portal when something scuttled out of the shadows.

Zak glanced over to see a giant spider ready to attack!

Chapter Four

"Help!" he shouted, leaping backward.

But the spider reversed course on spindly legs that made metallic clicks against the stone floor.

"Relax, Zak," Tash teased. "It's only a spider-shaped droid."

"Yeah," he replied. "But look what it's carrying." Attached to the spider droid's small body was a glass jar filled with yellow-green liquid. Floating in the liquid was a solid mass of grooved gray matter. A brain.

"It's a brain spider," Tash said. "Remember? We saw one the last time we were here."

"Yeah, but what are they for?" Zak asked Hoole.

"We can discuss them later," Hoole replied. "We are at the throne room."

They stepped through the portal and looked down on a scene of utter chaos.

Jabba's audience chamber was just as Tash remembered it—crowded with aliens from a dozen worlds. There were gangsters, smugglers, thieves, and bounty hunters, all of whom lived in the shadows of the Empire. They hovered around Jabba's throne like dark moons orbiting a massive planet. Whenever anything illegal happened in the galaxy, Jabba the Hutt was sure to be at the center.

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Something moved in the shadows nearby, and Zak jumped out of the way, thinking another brain spider had approached. Instead, something far more dangerous stepped into the light.

The bounty hunter Boba Fett.

Zak stared at the killer's helmet, which hid his face. Their paths had crossed once before, on a planet called Necropolis.

"Boba Fett!" Zak gasped. "I-I'm Zak Arranda. Remember me?"

The bounty hunter adjusted the blaster cradled in the crook of his arm.

Zak stammered, "Y-You saved me from being buried alive."

The man behind the mask said nothing. Zak saw his own reflection, twisted and warped, in the face of Boba Fett's helmet.

If Fett remembered him, he gave no sign. Without a word, the killer turned and stalked away.

Zak turned back to the center of the audience chamber. There, Jabba was talking to the local symbol of Imperial order and authority, Commander Fuzzel.

"He must have left for Jabba's palace right after we did," Tash whispered to Zak.

"Silence," Bib Fortuna warned.

In the audience chamber, Commander Fuzzel stood before Jabba's throne.

"Excellent work, Jabba," Commander Fuzzel was saying. "That's the third criminal you've turned in this month. The Empire thanks you."

From his platform, Jabba the Hutt rumbled a satisfied laugh. Tash noticed that the sluglike gangster looked bigger than the last time she'd seen him. He was growing fat on bowlfuls of live eels. "I'll take your thanks," the Hutt replied, "but I'd rather have the reward money. That criminal had a huge bounty on his head."

"You'll get the reward," Commander Fuzzel said. "All three criminals were wanted dead or alive, and I notice you turned them all in *dead*."

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The Hutt grinned. "They're less trouble that way. I'll expect the credits to be in my account by morning. Goodbye, Commander."

Zak turned to Hoole and whispered, "What's a gangster like Jabba doing turning criminals over to the Empire?"

"Quiet," Hoole replied softly. "Listen."

"One more thing," Fuzzel said before leaving the audience chamber. "There's a rumor that the killer Karkas is on Tatooine. I want him. I'll pay double."

"Double?" Jabba mused. His voice sounded like a rumbling stomach. The alien crowd watching the conversation also murmured in surprise. "I will put my best people on it," Jabba replied. "Good day."

This time the Imperial official took the hint and turned around, carrying his rolls of fat out of Jabba's audience chamber. As he left, Hoole led Zak and Tash before the throne while Bib Fortuna whispered in the Hutt's ear.

"Well, well," Jabba growled. "What brings you three back to my doorstep?"

"Jabba," Hoole began. Jabba's seedy henchmen leaned forward to listen. So did Zak and Tash. Hoole hadn't told them what he planned to ask. The Shi'ido continued, "Years ago you did me a favor. When I was on the run from the Empire, you managed to erase my name and records from the Imperial networks so that I could continue to move around the galaxy without arousing suspicion." He paused. "I'd like to ask—as a *favor*—if you could do that again."

The crowd rumbled. Hoole had used the word *favor*. It was very dangerous to owe a Hutt a favor, because a Hutt always collected.

Jabba stared at Hoole, and a broad smile crossed his slimy face. The Hutt's thick pink tongue slithered out and ran along the edge of his lips.

"This can be done," he gurgled, "for a price. I have a job that requires someone with your particular talents."

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Tash saw Hoole tense. This was the most dangerous part of the bargain. For years, she knew, Jabba had wanted to get Hoole on his payroll. The Shi'ido's shapechanging powers would make him an excellent spy, or even an assassin. She shook her head slowly. What if Jabba asked for something Hoole could not—or *would* not—do?

"Relax!" Jabba snorted. "I see the fear even in your stone face, Hoole!"

The crime lord waved toward Boba Fett, who had appeared near the Hutt's platform. "As you can see, I have all the assassins I need at the moment. No, this task is a little more... scholarly."

Jabba thumped his thick tail on the stone platform, and Bib Fortuna slithered forward. Carefully, he held up an ancient scroll. Both Tash and Zak gasped. They had grown up on computers, datadisks, and holographic projectors, just like their parents and grandparents before them. Paper books were rare treasures, and something as old as a scroll was almost unheard of.

"That has to be as old as the stars," Tash whispered. Hoole looked down at the document without touching it. His eyes had barely skimmed the first few lines before they blazed with interest. "Do you know what this is?" he asked Jabba the Hutt.

Jabba shrugged his fat shoulders. "I know it's valuable to the B'omarr monks. I found this scroll—along with a dozen others—in one of their tunnels. They've been begging to get it back ever since."

"*Are* you going to give it back?" the Shi'ido asked.

"Maybe," Jabba gurgled. "But first I want you to translate it. Translate this document for me, and I'll erase your names from the Empire's computer banks forever."

Tash had known Hoole long enough to read at least a few of his moods. Although his face was stern and motionless, she could tell by the way he leaned slightly forward, never taking his eyes off the scroll, that he wanted the job.

"Agreed," Hoole said, after waiting for almost a full minute.

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"Excellent!" Jabba roared. "It will take a few days to break into the Imperial computer. That should give you time to do your research. Fortuna, show them to their rooms!" The Hutt thumped his fat tail on the stone platform, dismissing them.

As they left Jabba's throne room, Tash felt dread creep into her stomach, as though they had just made a deal with the dark side.

Fortuna showed them to their quarters. Hoole was given his own room, and Zak and Tash shared a small bedchamber next door. Without wasting a moment, Jabba's servant then escorted them through one of the many dark hallways in the palace. But unlike the others, this one led down into the cool darkness of Tatooine, far beneath the hot sand on the surface.

"Who are these B'omarr monks, anyway?" Zak whispered in the dark.

Tash clicked her tongue. "If you read more, you'd know they're the ones who built this place. This was their fortress, before Jabba came and took it away from them. Now Jabba lets them live only in the lowest levels of the palace."

"I wonder if we'll meet one," her brother said.

"Meet now," Bib Fortuna said, stopping suddenly. He seemed eager to get back to the action and intrigue of Jabba's throne room. "I go."

Fortuna vanished into the darkness just as another figure appeared. This one was smaller, and dressed in a brown robe and hood. He was about Zak's height, and when he pulled back his hood, they saw the face of a human boy. He looked about a year older than Tash. "Greetings," he said in a friendly voice. "Do you wish to visit the B'omarr monks?"

"Yes, we do," Hoole replied.

A grin spread across the boy's face. "Great!" he said in a very unmonklike fashion. Then he said more seriously, "I mean, you are welcome. We don't get many visitors here. My name is Brother Beidlo. But you can call me Beidlo. I will be your guide."

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Beidlo led them down a long, curving hallway as he gave them a brief history of the B'omarr monks: how they had lived in the palace for years until Jabba arrived. Now the crime lord tolerated them as long as they didn't get in his way. Zak and Tash were fascinated by the things Beidlo said, but Hoole seemed more interested in studying lines of ancient writing that decorated the hallways.

Halfway down the corridor, Hoole stopped.

"These markings are quite similar to the writing on... the document I'm translating," he mused. "I must look at it again. Zak, Tash, let's go back."

"Oh," Beidlo said, disappointed. "But there's so much more to see."

"I wouldn't mind staying," Tash offered, trying to sound as mature as possible. "I mean, it's not often we get a chance for a guided tour. I'm sure it would be good experience."

Hoole considered. Tash and Zak could almost see his mind calculating how much trouble they might get into on their own. Finally, he agreed. "But keep an eye on a chrono. I want you back in our chambers by supper-time."

With their uncle gone, Zak and Tash picked up the pace of their steps and their questions. Zak couldn't help asking, "Don't the monks want their old homes back?"

Beidlo shrugged. "That's one of the things I don't understand yet. The monks don't seem to care. Every time I ask, they just tell me to push all such thoughts from my mind. I guess I'm just not enlightened enough."

"How long does it take to become enlightened?" Tash asked.

Beidlo shrugged. "It depends on the person. Some monks advance very quickly, but for most of us, it takes years."

"You seem like an awfully young monk," Tash observed.

Beidlo nodded. "I'm the newest member of the order."

"Is that why you get stuck with the job of greeting tourists?" Zak asked.

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"That's right. The other monks are too busy with their studies," Beidlo said. "But I don't mind. It's nice to see new faces once in a while. This place gets pretty boring."

"Sounds like Tash's kind of place," Zak grunted. Then he added, "If you don't like it here, why stay?"

Beidlo shrugged. "I don't have anywhere else to go, really. My parents were killed by Sand People, and the B'omarr monks were willing to take me in. Besides, everything's not as dry as the desert around here. Come on, I'll show you."

Beidlo turned down another passageway. "You'll find this interesting. I'm going to show you the Great Room of the Enlightened."

"So, what do you monks do in the Great Room of the Enlightened, anyway?" Zak asked, half-joking. "Dark, mysterious things? Secret rituals?"

Beidlo chuckled. "Hardly. But we manage to keep busy," he said. "We meditate... and think... and consider... and concentrate. It's a full day!"

Zak and Tash followed Beidlo through a wide portal.

"Take it from someone who spends every day trying to become one," Beidlo added. "There's absolutely nothing dark, mysterious, or wicked about the B'omarr monks."

As he said this, he led his visitors into an enormous room. Shelves lined the walls, but Zak's and Tash's eyes were drawn to a crowd of brown-robed monks standing around a table.

As soon as the newcomers entered, the monks whirled around to face them. Angry eyes glared from beneath their hooded cloaks. One of the monks was holding something close to his body. Seeing what it was, Tash and Zak both gasped.

In his cupped hands, the monk held the squishy gray blob of a human brain.

Chapter Five

The monks came toward them. They glided so smoothly and soundlessly across the floor that they seemed to float like ghosts.

They began pushing Zak, Tash, and Beidlo out of the room. Old, wrinkled faces glared at them from beneath the tattered hoods. Beyond them, Tash caught sight of another monk lying on the table. She couldn't see clearly, but she thought the top of his skull had been removed.

The monk holding the brain quickly laid the gray blob in a clear plastic tray, then pointed one slime-covered hand at Beidlo and growled, "Out."

The monk didn't need to raise his voice. That one raspy word carried all the threat that was needed.

One of the monks activated a switch, and a heavy door rolled across the portal. Before it closed, Zak and Tash glimpsed the shelves on the walls. They were lined with jars, and inside each jar was a brain soaking in yellow-green soup.

"What's going on?" Zak demanded. "What are they doing to that man?"

Beidlo stood with his back to the wall. Even in the underground gloom they could see how pale his face had become. He groaned, "Oh, I'm in trouble! They'll never make me a monk now."

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Tash grabbed Beidlo by the shoulders. "Beidlo, we've got to do something! They killed someone in there!"

Beidlo looked up as if suddenly realizing Zak and Tash were still there. "Him? Oh, no, no!" he said quickly. "You don't understand. They're not killing him. They're giving him eternal life."

"Right," Zak scoffed. "If that's true, then a coffin's just a permanent home."

Beidlo seemed more amused than alarmed. He sighed. "Listen, those monks are pretty old-fashioned. They got angry because I accidentally let outsiders into one of the brain transference ceremonies. But there's another monk I want you to meet. He'll explain everything."

Beidlo started down the hallway.

Zak and Tash looked at each other.

"What should we do?" Tash wondered aloud.

Zak scowled at her. "Don't ask me. You're the one who's all grown up, remember?"

"How could I forget?" Tash retorted. "I've got you here to remind me what a child acts like."

She started down the hall after Beidlo, leaving Zak to shake his head. If this was growing up, he wanted no part of it.

"Teenagers," he sighed, and hurried to catch up.

Zak and Tash followed Beidlo to a wide chamber filled with stone benches and tables. The room was large enough to hold a hundred monks, but the place was empty except for a solitary figure sitting in the corner.

"This is the monks' tea room," Beidlo explained. "Most of the B'omarr who aren't at the brain transference ceremony are off meditating right now, but I knew Grimpen would be here."

Before Tash and Zak could respond, the lone monk rose to his feet, threw back his hood, and greeted them with a warm smile. His hair was gray, but his face looked young, and his eyes were bright and clear blue.

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"Welcome, welcome!" the monk said with a hearty laugh. "It's not often we get strangers in our halls. My name is Brother Grimpen. You can skip the *Brother* part if you like."

Tash laughed. "Thanks. One brother's enough for me, anyway."

Zak frowned at her.

Tash ignored him and continued, "You're much friendlier than the other monks we just met."

Grimpen nodded sympathetically. "Many of our monks have lost their sense of politeness. Please forgive them."

"Politeness!" Zak said. "I thought those monks would kill us when we went into that Great Room of Enlightenment!"

Beidlo cast an embarrassed look at the older monk. "It was my fault. I accidentally interrupted a brain transference ceremony."

"Oh, that," Grimpen said with a wave of his hand. "Some of the old-timers think everything has to be such a secret. It makes them grumpy. They don't want outsiders getting hold of the B'omarr knowledge."

"You don't feel the same way?" Tash asked.

Grimpen looked into her eyes. She felt like she would fall into the deep blue of his gaze as he said, "I think knowledge should be for everyone. Wisdom may be found in many places. You, for instance. I sense that you are wise beyond your years."

Zak groaned inwardly. Why was this monk trying so hard to compliment Tash?

Aloud, Zak said, "What's all this about brain transference, anyway?"

Grimpen explained: "It's part of the B'omarr tradition. We seal ourselves off from distractions so we can concentrate more on the mysteries of the universe. Over the years, we become more and more enlightened. When we reach a certain stage of enlightenment, our brains are transferred out of our bodies into glass jars."

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"So we saw," Zak said. "And I guess sometimes those glass jars are attached to spider droids?"

"Correct," Grimpen said. "This allows the enlightened ones to move around and experience different surroundings while remaining detached from the world. That way, the enlightened can continue to think without distractions like hunger or sleep."

"The brain spiders take care of that for them?" Zak asked, impressed.

Grimpen nodded. "The droids keep the brains alive and healthy. Since you and I have bodies, we worry about eating, and sleeping, and getting tired. We get cold and hot. Inside the brain jars, the enlightened monks don't have to worry about any of that."

"Can they talk?" Zak asked, curious about the technology.

Grimpen shook his head. "It's possible to give them electronic voices," he said, "but Jabba the Hutt controls the palace. He grew tired of hearing the enlightened ones try to teach him their lessons, and he ordered all the voice boxes removed. Now, all the enlightened ones can do is think about the ultimate truth of the galaxy."

The ultimate truth of the galaxy? Tash was amazed. *Sounds like they're looking for the Force.* "What is this ultimate truth?" she asked Grimpen.

Grimpen smiled knowingly. "Somehow, I think you know already."

Tash blushed. "Spending all your time thinking and studying sounds like my idea of a perfect life."

"Yeah, perfectly boring," Zak muttered. "Look, Tash, it's time to get going."

Grimpen put a gentle hand on Tash's shoulder and held her eyes with his. "Tash, I sense that you have the potential for great enlightenment. You are welcome to visit and study here whenever you wish. There is much we can teach someone as wise as you."

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"What a load of bantha fodder," Zak grumbled as he and Tash returned to the upper levels of Jabba's palace.

"You're just jealous because he didn't pay any attention to you," Tash replied.

"Jealous?" Zak repeated in disbelief. "Jealous because I was ignored by a guy whose goal in life is to have his brain stuck in a jar? You've gone hyper."

Tash shrugged. Deep down, she knew Zak had a point—the B'omarr monks did have some strange practices. But they were also devoted to knowledge and learning, and that appealed to her. She had always loved reading and studying.

Besides, she thought, she had already begun to feel the Force. She had even used it once or twice. Maybe studying with Grimpén would help her develop her powers.

Tash and Zak reached their quarters to find Hoole standing at a round viewport in his room, staring out onto the hot desert sand. He hardly noticed when his niece and nephew entered the room.

"Uncle Hoole?" Zak asked. "Is something wrong?" Hoole said quietly, "I met with Jabba the Hutt again while you were down below. Apparently, he can't erase our records from the Imperial computers."

"Why not?" Zak asked. "Didn't he do it for you once before?"

Hoole nodded. "Yes, but that was years ago. Apparently, with so much Rebel activity, the Empire has tightened security. Ever since the Rebellion stole the Death Star plans and destroyed the space station, it's become impossible to splice into Imperial databanks."

"Then there's nothing he can do," Tash concluded. Hoole let out a small sigh, hardly more than a breath. "He offered to supply us with new names, new identities. He said no one would know they were fakes. We could become completely new people."

"New identities?" Tash said, her eyes brightening. "That sounds great. We can be anyone we want to be!"

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"Prime!" Zak agreed. "It'll be like we're spies."

Hoole's frown deepened. After a pause, he said, "We would not be spies. Spies pretend to be other people for a short time. We would actually have to abandon our old selves. Leave our names behind forever. Become totally new individuals."

"I could live with that," Tash said.

"I could not," Hoole said. "I may reject Jabba's offer."

"What!" Tash and Zak cried together.

"Why?" Tash added. "It sounds like the perfect solution."

Hoole glowered. "You would not understand." He refused to say anything more.

The evening and night passed slowly in their quarters. Hoole remained deep in thought. Tash dug a datapad out of her pack and read everything she could find on the B'omarr monks.

Zak sat on his bed, wishing the others weren't so determined to be serious.

The next day, Hoole rose early to continue his work on the B'omarr scrolls. "Until I make my final decision," he explained, "I will continue to work on those scrolls. Besides, they are worth studying." He paused meaningfully. "I want you both to understand that this is not a vacation. Jabba has extended his hospitality to us, but this is still a dangerous place. Be careful."

The minute he was gone, Tash started toward the tunnels of the B'omarr monks.

"Hey!" Zak said. "Uncle Hoole just finished telling us to stay out of trouble."

"I'm not getting into trouble," Tash responded. "Besides, he also said it was important to study the B'omarr monks."

"Important for *him*, not for *you*," her brother retorted. But Tash was already gone.

Zak caught up with her just as she reached the monks' tea room again. Surprisingly, it wasn't hard to find. The B'omarr monks were very orderly, and their tunnels were laid out in neat, organized rows.

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They found Beidlo in the tea room, using an old-fashioned push broom to sweep sand off the floor. His face lit up when he saw Zak and Tash. "I'm glad you're back! I'll be done with my chores in half an hour; then I can show you more of the tunnels. There are some excellent caverns, and even a few——"

"Actually," Tash confessed, "I was just looking for Brother Grimpen."

"Oh," Beidlo said. He looked disappointed. "All right. He's down that way." The young monk pointed toward a hallway at the end of the room.

"Thanks," Tash said, moving on.

"Don't feel bad," Zak said to Beidlo. "She's been doing that to me for a couple of days now. I'll talk to you later." He hurried after his sister.

"Tash!" Grimpen called out as they moved down the dark tunnel. The monk seemed to step out of the darkness itself. "So good to see you again," Grimpen said to Tash, barely nodding at Zak.

"I had some free time," Tash explained, "and you said we were welcome——"

"Of course, of course!" Grimpen said approvingly. "In fact, your timing is perfect. I was just going back to my private rooms to meditate. If you're really interested in the B'omarr ways, it's a perfect chance to learn."

"Let's go," Tash said.

"Um, Tash," Zak said, grabbing hold of her sleeve. "I'm not sure that's such a good idea. What would Uncle Hoole say about us going off with some stranger?"

Tash's eyes were like lasers blasting her younger brother. "You're starting to sound like a baby-sitter, and I don't need a baby-sitter, Zak. Besides, Grimpen is a monk. It's not like he's one of Jabba's henchmen."

"Exactly right," Grimpen said.

Zak gave up with a sigh. The strange thing was the more Tash wanted to be a grown-up, the more she behaved like a child. And

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the more Zak wanted her to be her old, thirteen year-old self, the more *he* sounded like an adult.

Why couldn't things just stay the way they were? he thought as he hurried to catch up. Beyond the tea room, the tunnels became more confusing. Zak found more twists and turns, and he nearly lost sight of Tash and Grimpen twice as they made sharp turns down smaller side tunnels, winding their way deeper into the catacombs of the ancient B'omarr temple.

"...There are many stages of spiritual growth," Grimpen was explaining to Tash. "At each stage, there is a test to make sure the monk understands what he has learned."

Tash, Zak, and Grimpen passed a pair of monks walking in the opposite direction. Beneath their hoods, the monks scowled at the two Arrandas. Zak had the strange sensation that the angry old monks wanted to see *his* brain on a shelf. He swallowed.

"What are the tests like?" Tash asked.

"Sometimes the tests are very easy, like answering questions or reciting passages from the ancient writings," Grimpen said. Up ahead, Zak and Tash caught sight of a faint light source. "And sometimes the tests are physical, to test how well a monk uses his mind over matter."

Grimpen stopped. Before them lay the source of the light they'd seen a moment before. They stood at the edge of a glowing bed of hot coals. Steam rose from the thick layer of fiery rocks, and now and then a rock would crack into smaller burning embers with a loud *pop!* The bed of coals stretched from wall to wall across the tunnel, and was far too wide to jump across.

"What's this?" Tash asked.

Grimpen flashed her a confident smile. "This is your first test, Tash."

Tash blinked. "But how——?"

"Like this," Grimpen replied. Then, calmly, he stepped onto the blazing coals. Zak winced, but Grimpen looked as if he were calmly walking across a field of grass. Step by step, he crossed the

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coal bed as light and flames licked at his ankles, and steam rose up around his face.

He reached the other side unharmed.

Grimpen stretched out his hand to Tash. "Your turn."

Zak grabbed Tash's arm. "You're beyond hyper if you do that."

Tash shook her arm free of Zak's hold. "If he did it, I can do it."

Grimpen nodded. "All you have to do is believe, Tash. This is your pathway to a whole new life, a whole new way of seeing the galaxy."

Tash paused, but only for a moment. Grimpen was offering her what she wanted——something that Uncle Hoole and even Zak could not give her.

"Don't do it, Tash," Zak warned.

"Relax," she replied.

She stepped onto the burning coals. As she did, she vanished into a cloud of steam.

And screamed.

Chapter Six

"Tash!" Zak cried. He leaped to the edge of the burning coals, reaching through the steam.

But Tash's scream hadn't been a cry for help.

"It doesn't hurt!" she shouted in excitement. "It's not hot at all!"

"Of course not," Grimpen called back. "Once your mind reaches a certain advanced stage, normal sensations like heat and cold no longer mean anything. It's mind over matter."

The steam cleared momentarily, and Zak saw his sister step across to the other side of the coal bed. Zak couldn't believe it. He looked down at the coals and saw Tash's footprints clearly in the glowing rock. Wherever her steps had crushed a rock, tiny flames shot up, leaving a fiery trail.

"What about me?" Zak called out to Tash.

"You are welcome to join us," Grimpen said. "If you have the strength of mind, all you have to do is cross."

Zak studied the coals again. He was tempted to try. But Tash had the Force on her side—he had seen her use it in the past.

"No thanks," he replied.

Grimpen shrugged. "Then we will say good-bye. Come on, Tash, there are many things I can teach you." Tash glanced back at her brother for a moment, then turned and disappeared.

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Zak stood alone in the tunnel. "Oh, frag," he whispered. "It's not fair."

He was somewhere in Jabba's palace—he didn't know where. He'd been walking for an hour, turning down whatever passageway caught his eye, going through whichever doors were open. Sometimes short-snouted Gamorrean guards appeared and pushed him away, not allowing him through certain portals, but Zak didn't care. He just turned and walked in another direction.

Zak had lost friends before. He'd even lost members of his family. Everyone he had ever known was wiped out when the Empire destroyed Alderaan. But this was different. Tash wasn't the victim of some Imperial plot. She wasn't being forced to leave. She had *chosen* to leave him behind.

He hadn't felt so abandoned since the day his parents died.

Click-click-click. Click-click-click.

"Maybe it's me," he wondered aloud.

His voice echoed down the hallway, making him feel even lonelier.

Click-click-click.

Under the echoes of his voice, Zak heard something scratching on the stone floor, but he was too deep in thought to pay much attention.

Tash is older than me. Maybe she is just growing up. Maybe I am too much of a kid for her now, and I'm just in her way.

Click-click-click-click-click.

He frowned. Leaving a friend behind didn't seem like a very grown-up thing to do. It wasn't something his mom and dad would have done. It wasn't even something Uncle Hoole would do.

Click-click-click-click-click-click!

Suddenly, Zak realized that the noise had become louder. It sounded like a dozen metal knives being dropped to the ground, one after another. "What——?" Zak started to ask.

A brain spider shuffled out of the darkness.

"Oh, great," Zak muttered.

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The mechanical spider took a few more steps. Click-click-click! Then it stopped a meter away from Zak. In the center of its metal body, he could see the gray brain floating in a greenish liquid in its transparent container. The spider's servos hummed as if it were waiting.

"What, am I in *your* way, too?" Zak said sarcastically. He stepped to the left to clear a path for the spider.

The spider followed him.

"All right, I'll go the other way." Zak stepped to the right.

So did the brain spider.

"What do you want?" he asked it.

But the brain spider couldn't answer.

Zak frowned. "I'm in no mood to dance with droids, thanks, so I'll be going." He took one step back, and then another.

The brain spider followed.

As Zak took a few more steps, the creeping brain-carrier matched his movements. When he sped up, the brain spider increased its speed. It had no eyes, but Zak was overcome by the sensation that the brain itself was... *staring* at him.

"This is not prime," he whispered, and turned to run. The brain spider ran after him.

Clickclickclickclickclickclickclickclickclick!

"Help!" Zak called out. "Help me!"

"*Help... help... me...*," his echo called back to him.

Where was he? How far had he come?

Zak didn't know the answer. But by the sound of its clicking legs, the brain spider was closing in on him. He didn't want to find out what those metal limbs would do if they caught him.

A small glowpanel set in the wall ahead revealed a narrow opening and a steep staircase. Without slowing, Zak plunged through the doorway and scampered down the stairs.

Behind him, he could hear the brain spider slow, then stop. It wasn't following him anymore!

Lit only by a faint glowpanel every dozen meters or so, the stairs spun their way for two hundred steps down into the planet.

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At the bottom, Zak paused to catch his breath. There was still no sound from the brain spider.

He saw a set of gates that led into a wide corridor. The gates were made of thick durasteel bars.

"A dungeon?" he muttered.

Two voices echoed from down the corridor, breaking the silence. He crept forward. If he wasn't supposed to be here, he didn't want to get caught—even if he could explain why he'd run down the stairs.

A dozen meters farther on, the corridor met another hallway, with paths leading left and right. The voices were coming from the left. They were whispering, but Zak was able to catch some of the words.

"I can't stand this waitin'," rasped one angry voice. "I'm not used to waitin' for anything."

A deeper voice rumbled back, "Be patient. You'll have your chance soon enough." Zak was sure the second speaker was Jabba the Hutt.

Creeping forward, Zak peeked around the corner. The hallway wasn't well lit, but he clearly saw the bulky figure of the crime lord. Next to him stood a huge human. By the dim light on his face, Zak saw that one of the human's eyes had been nearly crushed.

"How soon?" crush-face growled. "This planet's been crawlin' with Imperials ever since those Rebels blasted outta here ten months ago. I didn't come all this way just to get thrown into a detention center."

The Hutt said, "You'll have no fear of Imperials. Just wait one more day, Karkas."

Karkas? Zak thought. Hadn't the Imperials been looking for someone named Karkas? What was he doing here, and why was Jabba helping him, and not turning him in for the reward?

Click-click-click.

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Zak heard the sound trickle down the staircase behind him. The brain spider had followed him down the stairs. If Jabba and his companion heard the noise, they ignored it.

"One more day," Karkas agreed.

Click-click. Zak looked around for another way out. There was none.

"Until then," Jabba said. Zak heard the wet, squishy sound of the Hutt slithering along the stone floor.

Just in time, Zak thought. He dashed forward. The voices had come from the left, so he cut to the right and ran as quickly and quietly as he could.

Speeding through the gloomy tunnels, Zak finally found an open door. He leaped through the door, hoping to find another tunnel that would lead him back to the higher levels. Instead, he saw only three thick walls.

He had reached a dead end.

Zak spun around just in time to see a heavy door slide shut behind him. A small set of polished bars guarded a tiny window in the door.

Zak had walked into one of Jabba's prison cells. And now he was locked inside.

Chapter Seven

"Hey!" Zak yelled. "Let me out! Somebody let me out!"

Click-click-click.

Zak watched through the bars as the brain spider approached. It shuffled up to the cell door and straightened its legs, raising the brain up to its full height. The brain seemed to be studying Zak through its transparent jar.

Zak shuddered. "Well, at least you can't get me," he whispered. "So why don't you get back to your study or your meditation or whatever it is you do."

The spider turned and shuffled away.

Once the spider was gone, Zak filled his lungs with air and shouted as loudly as he could. "Help! Someone help! I'm stuck in here!"

He yelled until his voice went hoarse. Then he paused to listen. A voice answered.

"That won't do any good."

It came from across the hall. The light was dim, but Zak could just make out another cell across the way, and a prisoner inside with his face pressed against the barred window.

"But I got in here by accident," Zak explained.

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"I know," said the prisoner. "I saw you. But that won't matter. No one comes down here but the Gamorreans, and they don't speak Basic."

"You mean I'm stuck here?"

The prisoner nodded. "But it won't be for long. From what I hear, none of the prisoners stay for long."

"You mean they go free?" Zak asked.

"I didn't say that," the man replied.

Zak swallowed. "But when they see me, they'll know there's been a mistake. They'll know I didn't do anything."

A grim laugh came from the other cell. "Neither did I. I just came here thinking of joining the B'omarr monks. I thought they'd accept me, too. I even passed some of their tests. One of them said I had great potential. The next thing I knew, Jabba's goons had thrown me in prison."

The B'omarr monks. Zak was beginning to get a bad feeling about them. Why were they so secretive? Why had one of their brain spiders chased him? And why had they let this man get thrown into Jabba's dungeon? Zak heaved a frustrated sigh. If Tash had been with him, he knew they'd have figured it out together.

As his eyes adjusted to the deep gloom of his cell, Zak looked around his tiny prison. There were no chairs, not even a cot. A skeleton lay on the floor next to the door. One arm had been stretched forward, scratching at the door. The bones were dry and brittle. Whoever the prisoner had been, he had died long ago. By the looks of his untouched bones, the guards seemed to have simply forgotten about him.

Looking closer, Zak realized that the prisoner hadn't been scratching at the door, he'd been chipping at the stones with a small knife. The blade was rusted and old now, but it still looked solid. Trying not to touch the old bones, Zak took the knife from the skeleton's hand.

Examining the chipped stone where the prisoner had been working, Zak saw the outline of an access panel.

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"It must control the door mechanism," he said.

The poor dead captive had nearly chipped his way into the panel, but he must have grown too weak. Getting a good grip on the knife, Zak went to work.

"Hope you don't mind if I finish the job," he said to the skeleton. "It's just that I don't want to end up like you."

Zak had nearly broken through to the wiring that controlled his cell door.

"Hey, what are you doing?" called the voice from across the hall.

"Trying to get out of here," Zak replied between blows with the rusty knife. "Almost got it."

"Hey!" said the other prisoner. "If you get out, will you free me, too?"

Zak paused. He knew about Jabba the Hutt's reputation for cruelty. For all he knew, the other prisoner might be as innocent as he was. On the other hand, he might be a *real* criminal. Zak remembered that Jabba had already turned three wanted criminals in to the Imperials. Maybe this was yet another killer.

"I don't know," he said at last. "How do I know you're not in here for a good reason?"

"I didn't do anything!" the man yelled. "You gotta believe me!"

Clunk!

One last stroke of the knife opened a small hole in the wall, exposing a tangle of wires. Zak didn't know which one powered the automatic door, so he just cut them all with a quick slash of the knife. There was a groan of metal rollers, and the locks that held the prison door in place suddenly relaxed. Zak grabbed hold of the bars and pulled. The door was heavy, but he managed to open it enough to squeeze through.

"You did it!" the other prisoner cheered. "Now, please, let me out!"

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Zak stepped closer to the other cell door. The prisoner was human, with a large nose and long hair. His features were smooth. He looked more like a scholar than a criminal.

Zak hesitated. Suppose he made a mistake and freed a wanted criminal? Wouldn't that make him an accomplice?

But if the man really was innocent, and Zak abandoned him, he'd be helping Jabba the Hutt with one of his many crimes.

Zak wavered, unsure of what to do. Either way, he might make a terrible mistake.

"If you're innocent," he said, "why did Jabba throw you in jail?"

"I told you I don't know!" the man said. "Please help me!"

Zak decided. The man just didn't seem like a criminal to him. Locating the door controls, Zak unlocked the cell. The door slid open, and the man stepped forward. He was very slender, with smooth hands. He cried out in relief as he slipped through the door.

"Thanks! That's one I owe you!" the man said. "Now I'm getting out of here as fast as I can!" He bolted away into the darkness.

Zak was about to follow, but five pointy fingernails dug into his shoulder and a voice snarled in his ear, "What are you doing here?"

Chapter Eight

Zak spun around and found himself face-to-face with the pale, oily visage of Bib Fortuna. Fortuna's sharp teeth bit into his lower lip as he glared at Zak.

"I got lost," Zak explained. "I accidentally stumbled into one of the prison cells and it took me a while to get out."

Fortuna spied the two open doors. "Where is the other prisoner?" he demanded.

"Prisoner?" Zak said. "What prisoner?"

Another growl escaped from between the alien's teeth. "Never mind. This place is restricted. Do not come here again or you will become a permanent resident."

Zak didn't argue. Fortuna showed him the way out, and Zak hurried back to the upper levels. He rushed into Hoole's quarters, where he found the Shi'ido poring over the B'omarr manuscripts.

"Very interesting," Hoole said, more to himself than to Zak. "These B'omarr monks have developed some fascinating practices." He pointed to some of the markings on the scroll. To Zak, they looked like a bunch of scribbles.

"See here," Hoole explained. "Sometimes the B'omarr used tricks to convince their students that they had mind control power. One of the tricks involved lume rocks."

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"Lume rocks, right," Zak said, still catching his breath. "But Uncle Hoole——"

"They're quite clever," Hoole continued. "They appear to give off light and heat, but they don't actually burn the skin. The B'omarr monks tell the students to hold them, and the students think they're using their minds to resist the heat."

That got Zak's attention. He recalled the test Grimpen had given Tash. " 'Hot coals,' my afterburners," he grumbled.

"What was that?" Hoole asked.

More loudly, Zak asked, "You mean these monks are actually fakes?"

"Not exactly," Hoole explained. "These tricks are used to build confidence in the students. The monks believe that if the students *think* they can do certain things long enough, eventually they can. In addition, the monks are the only beings that have achieved the ability to do brain transference, and——"

"Uncle Hoole, listen," Zak interrupted. "Something really strange is going on. First I was chased into the dungeons by a brain spider. And I met someone there who I'm sure was innocent so I freed him and——"

"Wait a moment," Hoole demanded. He gave Zak a look that made the young Arranda's heart skip a beat. "You went into Jabba's dungeon? You *freed* a prisoner? That was extremely unwise."

"There's more," Zak continued. "I overheard Jabba the Hutt talking to someone named Karkas. That's the criminal the Imperials are after! It sounded like they were working together."

Hoole nodded. "Very well, Zak. Thank you for the information. Now, please, do not wander away from our rooms again." He turned back to his scrolls.

Zak's jaw dropped. "Uncle Hoole! Aren't you going to do anything?"

Hoole looked up. "What should I do?"

Zak was dumbstruck. Was this really his uncle? Hoole was usually the first to act when he saw something bad happening. "I

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don't know," Zak replied, "call the Imperials, confront Jabba. Karkas is wanted in two dozen star systems!"

Hoole sighed. "Zak, Jabba is a gangster. I am sure that you are right—— Jabba is up to something. But there is no way I can stop it. Not while we are under his roof. I do not agree with his methods, but considering Jabba's power, there is very little we can do about it at the moment. You are being a little naïve."

"Naïve?" Zak tried to get his mouth around the new word.

"It means young and innocent," Hoole explained.

"*Young* again," Zak groaned. "You're starting to sound like Tash."

"Speaking of whom," the Shi'ido said, "where is your sister? You two are usually inseparable."

Zak grimaced. "She made friends with one of the B'omarr monks. I guess she'd rather be with him than with me." Zak was hoping his uncle would hear the frustration in his voice, but Hoole was too preoccupied.

"Considering what you have just told me, I think it might be best if you and Tash stay here for a while. Please go down to the B'omarr tunnels and find her. And Zak——" he said with a knowing look, "stay out of Jabba the Hutt's business."

Zak grumbled to himself as he left Hoole's room. First his sister abandoned him, then his uncle called him naïve, and now he'd become an errand boy.

Zak walked down the hall nervously. At any moment he expected someone to jump out at him. But nothing happened. He passed two or three beings who either ignored him or nodded in his direction. Bib Fortuna drifted across his path, hardly noticing the young human.

Everything was as normal as it could be in the palace of Jabba the Hutt.

Uncle Hoole's right, Zak thought as he descended into the B'omarr tunnels. I have to remember where I am. Wanted criminals and innocent prisoners aren't out of the ordinary here. There's nothing for me to worry about.

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The tunnels were deserted. Keeping an eye out for brain spiders, Zak tried to remember where the monks' tea room was, figuring he'd find someone there who could help him locate Tash.

"Psst! Zak!" a voice whispered.

Zak looked around. No one was there.

"Over here!" The voice came from a dark corner where the corridor curved. Stepping into the corner, Zak saw Brother Beidlo huddled there. He looked frightened.

"What is it?" Zak asked.

"Keep your voice down," Beidlo warned.

Two monks appeared in the hallway, and Beidlo pulled Zak into the darkness. The young monk pressed his back against the wall until the B'omarr had passed.

"You have to get out of here," Beidlo told Zak in a frightened whisper. "We all do. Or we're all going to end up dead!"

Chapter Nine

The look of fear on Beidlo's face was so intense that Zak thought he might be crazy. "What do you mean?" he asked. "This morning you said everything was just fine."

"That was before"——Beidlo swallowed—— "...before I found out about the brain transfers."

Zak scratched his head. His mind was cluttered enough without Beidlo confusing him further. "But you told us about the brain transfers. You just about showed us one!"

"I know! I know!" Beidlo explained. "That's how it started. There wasn't supposed to be a brain transfer yesterday. It made me curious, so I started looking around. I found out that there have been an awful lot of unscheduled brain transfers recently. Then I realized there are at least twice as many brain spiders as there were when I joined the B'omarr just a few months ago."

"So?" Zak asked. "Doesn't that just mean more monks are becoming enlightened or whatever?"

"Either that," Beidlo said in a trembling voice, "or someone is removing their brains against their will."

"What?" Zak said in disbelief. "That doesn't make any sense. Why would someone want to stick their brains in little jars? Besides, Uncle Hoole just told me that only the B'omarr monks

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know how to perform the operation. Which means they're doing it to themselves."

Beidlo shook his head. "No, no, it's worse than that. Ten monks have supposedly become enlightened in the past few months. But there have been fifteen operations! And I'm telling you, there are way too many brain spiders around. And they're acting strangely."

Zak remembered the brain spider that had chased him. "I can't argue with that."

"Something bad is happening here," Beidlo nearly sobbed. "Someone is performing the brain transfers on monks who aren't ready!"

Zak swallowed. "Okay, if this is true, why tell me? Why not tell the other monks?"

Beidlo smacked his head in frustration. "Don't you think I tried that? But the monks just don't care. I told you, they spend all their time studying and thinking. They don't care what happens to their bodies. They don't care about anything outside their meditation. They won't listen!"

"And you think I will," Zak guessed.

"You and your uncle. Please, call the authorities. Ask them to come down here and investigate. Anything!"

Zak wasn't sure what to think. He didn't know anything about brain spiders or B'omarr monks. Beidlo's story didn't make very much sense. But he still had the nagging feeling that something weird was going on in Jabba's palace. "Okay, I'll tell my uncle. Maybe he'll have an idea."

"Thank you!" Beidlo said in relief. "While you do that, I'm going to tell the one monk who might be willing to act. Grimpen's not like the rest. He'll get to the bottom of this!"

Zak hurried up the tunnel as Beidlo ran in the opposite direction. Armed with this new information, Zak returned to his uncle's quarters.

"Back so soon?" Hoole asked. "Where's Tash?"

Zak quickly explained what Beidlo had told him.

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Hoole frowned. "I do not understand, Zak. What would the monks have to gain by doing more brain transfers? And why would they do them on anyone but other monks?"

"I don't know," Zak replied, "but I'm telling you, something's wrong here."

The Shi'ido nodded. "I think you're right, Zak. Come on."

Hoole returned to the B'omarr tunnels with Zak, and together they searched for Tash. They searched in the hallways, they searched in the tea room, they even found a small library—but there was no sign of Tash.

Once in a while, a brown-robed monk would wander by. Hoole would stop the monk and ask if he had seen a young human girl. But each time, the monk merely stared at Hoole for a moment, then walked on without saying a word.

"Friendly bunch," Zak sighed.

"Let's continue," Hoole said.

They looked for nearly an hour, but there was no sign of Tash. Finally, just as they were about to give up, another monk approached. Zak decided to try once more.

"Excuse me," he said, "but have you seen——Oh, Beidlo, it's you!"

Beidlo blinked as though he'd been daydreaming. "Huh?. Oh, yes, it's me. What can I do for you?"

"What can y-you...?" Zak stammered. "I warned Uncle Hoole, just like you wanted. Now we're looking for Tash."

Beidlo looked confused and seemed annoyed. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about," Zak exclaimed. "The brain transfers! An hour ago, you were terrified that everyone was going to die."

"Oh, yes, that. Don't worry about it. I think I was wrong."

"Excuse me, young man," Hoole interjected. "Are you saying that there is nothing out of the ordinary going on here?"

"Yes, that's what I'm saying," Beidlo said. "Now excuse me, I've got... things to do."

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Beidlo pushed past them and hurried along the tunnel.

Hoole cast a scolding glance at Zak.

"Uncle Hoole, I——"

"I don't blame you, Zak," Hoole interrupted. "Jabba's palace can be quite confusing. But you must understand, this isn't like any other place you've been. Strangeness and danger are normal here."

Zak didn't argue... but he didn't agree, either. Beidlo had been terrified only a short time ago. Now he hardly seemed to remember the conversation.

"I'm not suggesting you did anything wrong, Zak," Hoole said as they returned to their chambers. "It is simply that this place is too full of intrigue for someone your age. That's not your fault—it is just a question of experience. You will be much safer if you stay near me."

Hoole reached his own room and pointed to Zak's quarters next door.

"I promise you," he said, "that as long as you stay near your room, nothing bad will happen."

"Yes, Uncle Hoole," Zak said sullenly. He walked into his room.

And found Tash hanging upside down from the ceiling like a piece of meat on a hook.

Chapter Ten

"Tash!" he yelled at the top of his lungs.

"What!" she screamed back. Her eyes flew open and she plummeted headlong toward the floor, where she landed with a heavy thud. Zak saw a small bar attached to a rope dangling from the ceiling. Tash had been hanging from the bar by her feet.

"Thanks a lot, laser brain!" Tash said, sitting up and rubbing her head. "You nearly scared the life out of me."

"I scared *you*?" Zak retorted. "What in space were you doing hanging from the ceiling?"

Tash sighed like a weary teacher explaining a lesson to a thick headed student. "It's a B'omarr meditation exercise. Grimpen showed me how to do it."

"I knew that monk had you turned inside out, but I didn't know he had you turned upside down as well," Zak said snidely.

"Funny," his sister replied. "Just the kind of thing I'd expect from someone as unenlightened as you."

Zak smirked. "Oh, like you're so wise."

Tash got to her feet and limped around for a moment to make sure her leg wasn't damaged. "According to Grimpen, I am. He says only one person in a billion has the potential that I have."

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"Great," Zak said under his breath, "you're still taking compliments from a guy who wants to have his brain removed."

More loudly, he said, "Listen, Tash, I know we haven't been getting along too well, but I need your help. There's something odd going on. First I was chased by a brain spider. Then I met this prisoner, and now Beidlo is acting very strange——"

"Zak." Tash held up one hand to stop him. "I'm sorry if I've been rude to you. I don't mean to be. It's just that meeting Grimpen has opened my eyes. You know how much I like to study, and you know that I'm trying to figure out how to use the Force. The B'omarr meditations Grimpen has shown me really help. I feel like I'm starting to understand things."

"Great. So try to understand this," Zak continued. He told her about Beidlo's strange behavior.

Tash shrugged. Her face took on a distant look. "It sounds as if everything worked itself out, Zak. I have more important things to think about."

"More important!" Zak sputtered. "What's more important than making sure we're all safe? I suppose now you're going to hang from the ceiling by your big toe?"

Tash's face turned red, but she made a great effort to remain calm. She forced her face to look relaxed and walked out of the room.

"You handled that very well," said Grimpen. She had returned to his chamber.

"Thanks," Tash said. She liked listening to his voice. Grimpen seemed to know her very well. He always found the good in her. "But I can't stay here long. Uncle Hoole told us not to go too far from our quarters."

"I understand," Grimpen said sympathetically. He was sitting cross-legged in his small meditation room. "But I'm glad you told me about Zak. Tash, this may be hard to hear, but I think you're

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wise enough to understand. Sometimes, as we become more enlightened, our friends become jealous. They try to hold us back." He looked deeply into her eyes. "I think Zak is holding you back."

Tash nodded sadly. "Maybe he is."

"Giving up old friendships is one test of enlightenment," Grimpen explained. "But there is another test that awaits you. It's a test of courage. .."

An hour later, Tash Arranda stood at the edge of a vast pit in the middle of the desert. The sands of Tatooine stretched out in all directions.

What am I doing here? she thought.

Then she pushed the thought away. She knew why she was there. Grimpen had explained it to her: "In order to become truly enlightened, we have to face our fears. All the great monks of the past have gone through a test of courage, and you too must take this step if you are to become enlightened. You must walk in a full circle around the edge of the Great Pit of Carkoon."

Deep in the sand of the Great Pit of Carkoon was where the Sarlacc lived.

The Great Pit of Carkoon wasn't far from Jabba's palace. The sandy pit led down to a wide hole—but it was no ordinary cave or tunnel. The pit was also the mouth of the Sarlacc. The Sarlacc's maw was always open, waiting to devour anyone or anything that came within reach of the tentacles that protruded from its mouth. Row after row of sharp, needlelike teeth stuck out from the sides of the Sarlacc's mouth. Moving around the teeth, the tentacles waited like wriggling tongues, probing for any foolish travelers who came too close.

"There's nothing to it," Tash whispered to herself "I can do this cruising on sublight engines."

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Casually—but carefully Tash began to walk around the edge of the pit. Once or twice, her footsteps sent a tiny avalanche of sand trickling down the sloping side of the pit and into the Sarlacc's mouth. In response, a thick tentacle would lash out, searching for food, then slither back into the Sarlacc's giant mouth.

Tash was halfway around the circuit and growing very proud of herself. This was a breeze. She could hardly believe Grimpen had made such a big deal of this test. She could hardly believe it was a test at all.

At that moment, a voice nearly shouted in her ear. "Tash, what are you doing?"

It was Zak. He must have followed her. He had snuck up on her during her walk.

These thoughts passed quickly through Tash's mind. Only when she finished thinking them did she realize that she had slipped and fallen to one knee at the edge of the pit.

And only after *that* did she finally understand that she hadn't slipped.

The Sarlacc's tentacle was wrapped around her leg.

Chapter Eleven

The Sarlacc's tentacle was firmly wound around Tash's ankle. One strong pull dragged her a few meters down the side of the pit. Her hands clutched for something to hold on to, but all she grabbed was sand.

"Help!" she cried, her eyes going wide with fear.

Zak lunged forward and grabbed her outstretched hand. He tried to brace himself in the sand, but it was like trying to stand on top of water. His feet just sank into the soft yellow grains.

The Sarlacc pulled again. Tash slid another meter down into the pit, this time dragging Zak with her.

"Do something!" Tash yelled.

"Can you shake free?" he asked.

Tash tried to pull her leg up, but it wouldn't budge. "The Sarlacc's too strong!"

More tentacles started to wriggle upward. The Sarlacc pulled again, dragging Tash closer to its mouth and pulling Zak as well. As he slid down the sandy slope, Zak felt something scratch his stomach. At first he ignored it... he had to hold on to Tash! But when the Sarlacc pulled again, the scratch became unbearable. As quickly as he could, Zak reached down to brush the sharp object away. His hand touched something in his pocket. Grabbing it, he pulled the object into view.

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He was holding the rusty knife he'd found in the dungeon.

"Hang on, Tash," he urged her. "I've got an idea."

Letting go of her hand, Zak carefully eased himself down beside her. He had to move slowly to keep from slipping too far down the pit.

The Sarlacc's tentacle had wrapped itself twice around Tash's ankle. The brownish-green tentacle looked tough. "Not as tough as stone," Zak told himself.

He plunged the knife into the Sarlacc's flesh.

Deep beneath them, buried under tons of sand, the Sarlacc roared. The ground trembled, causing little rivers of sand to pour down the slope and into the monster's mouth.

Still, the tentacle held. The Sarlacc refused to give up its meal.

Zak raised the knife and brought it down again. This time the blade sank deep. The tentacle slipped free, taking the knife with it, and slithered back into the Sarlacc's mouth.

Zak and Tash scrambled up the slope until they reached the top of the pit and safety.

Zak climbed to his feet, brushing sand off his clothes as he turned to grin at Tash.

She wasn't smiling.

"You stupid nerfherder!" she yelled.

Zak was stunned.

"You could have gotten me killed!" she fumed.

"I just saved your life!" he protested.

"I didn't need saving until you showed up! I wasn't in any trouble until you made me slip. And by the way, you let the Sarlacc know I was there when you yelled."

Zak tried to argue. "But——"

"Oh, never mind!" she said, stomping off through the sand. "Just stop following me around like a little lost bantha cub!"

Zak made his own way back to Jabba's palace. All he had wanted to do was make sure Tash was safe. Wasn't that the job of a brother? Wasn't that the job of a friend?

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Moping through the palace, Zak reached their rooms just as Hoole arrived. "Zak!" the Shi'ido sighed. "Where have you been? Where is Tash?"

"Just... around," Zak replied. He'd already made her mad enough. He didn't want to get her in trouble with Uncle Hoole.

Zak let out a deep breath. "Uncle Hoole, can I talk to you?"

"I don't understand Tash," Zak said, once they'd seated themselves in Hoole's room. "We've always been pretty close. Especially after Mom and Dad died. I mean, we get into little fights, but we've always been friends first. Now she treats me like I'm a little kid. It's like she doesn't want to be friends anymore."

Zak felt his face redden. He even *felt* like a little kid saying it.

Hoole's face softened more than Zak had ever seen. The hard lines vanished. Although they'd been together for almost a year now, Zak and Hoole had never had a serious talk.

"Zak," Hoole said gently. "You know I do not have much experience as a parent, or even an uncle. I have always been too busy with my research. So it would be wrong for me to try to sound like a parent now."

"But," he continued, "I think I can help you by telling you what I have noticed as an anthropologist. Humans of Tash's age need to feel grown up. They want to find new friends and new ways to have fun. They change."

Hoole pointed at Zak, then at himself. "I have always found it very strange, the changes humans go through during their lives. We Shi'ido do not do that. Our personalities never change. Humans never change their shape, but their personalities are always changing—sometimes happy, sometimes sad, always finding new interests. Shi'ido, however, change shape all the time, but our personalities remain the same from the day we are born. That is what makes us what we are."

Zak was amazed. Hoole had never spoken to him about anything this personal.

Hoole continued. "But there is an old saying among the Shi'ido: 'No matter how many times we change our shape, we

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always look like ourselves to those who know us.' It means that whatever shape I choose, my true friends will recognize me."

He put a hand on Zak's shoulder. "What is true for my appearance is true for Tash's personality. I am sure that if you look closely, you will find the Tash you always knew."

Zak could hardly believe his ears. Hoole had always tried to protect his niece and nephew——several times he'd even risked his own life to save theirs. But Zak always thought Hoole was doing what he *had* to do, not what he wanted to do.

Realizing that Hoole really did care for him, Zak took his words to heart. Maybe Hoole was right about Tash. And if he was right, then their friendship could last, whatever Tash was going through.

Excusing himself, Zak went to look for his sister. He had a feeling he knew where to find her.

He caught up with her in the monks' tunnels.

"Hey," he said.

"Hey," she replied.

"I thought you'd be with Grimpen," he said, trying not to sound annoyed.

She shrugged. "I can't find him. I guess he's off meditating somewhere."

Zak took a deep breath. "Look, Tash. I want to apologize for getting on your nerves. I know you want to do other things, without me. It's just hard. You've always been my best friend——even if you *are* my sister."

They both laughed.

"Anyway," he continued, "it's kind of hard for me to sit back and watch you go off somewhere else. But if it's what you want, I can get used to it, I guess."

Tash nodded. "I'm sorry for calling you names before." Then she smiled. "You know, I should be mad at you."

"Why?" Zak asked.

"Because here I am trying to be so mature, and you come along acting more like a grown-up than me!"

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Now they really laughed—the way neither of them had laughed in many months.

When he caught his breath, Zak said, "Just promise me that no matter how old we get, we'll still be friends."

"You bet," his sister answered. "We're family, Zak. We can get through anything."

Together, they turned to go.

Together, they froze in sheer terror.

Together, they realized that they were surrounded by brain spiders.

Chapter Twelve

A dozen brain spiders shuffled forward, crowding the hallway. Their metal forelegs rose up, waving in the air, snatching at Zak and Tash.

The two Arrandas leaped backward, and the brain spiders charged.

"I think we can outrun them!" Zak said.

"Why should we run?" Tash asked. "They're just B'omarr monks. I mean, the *brains* of B'omarr monks. They're enlightened, remember? They're not going to hurt us. They're friendly. Watch."

She started in the direction of Grimpen's cell. But a brain spider leaped into her path, its front legs slashing. Zak grabbed his sister's shirt and pulled her back just in time.

"If that's friendly," Zak said, "I'd hate to see them get upset."

Tash cast a confused look at the brain spiders. "I don't get it," she said to the brain inside the mechanical creature. "I thought you were supposed to be——Hey!"

The spider had slashed at her again, nearly slicing a gash in the front of her shirt. "Zak, maybe you're right."

"Come on!" he replied. He and Tash turned and sprinted down the hallway, hoping to put distance between themselves and the mechanical monsters.

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Ahead, three shapes with spindly legs scuttled from around a corner.

More brain spiders.

"This way!" Tash suggested, turning down another corridor.

"Do you know where you're going?" Zak gasped between breaths.

"No," Tash panted in reply, "but I'll take any place where those things aren't!"

But the brain spiders seemed to be everywhere. They scurried on their giant legs to cut off every exit. They scuttled down hallways, trying to trap the two Arrandas. The spiders had spent far more time in the tunnels than Zak and Tash. They knew every inch of the underground complex.

There was no escape.

Twice, Zak and Tash passed small groups of B'omarr monks. Each time, Zak and Tash begged them for help, pleading for them to make the brain spiders stop.

The monks ignored them.

"They won't act," Tash gasped. "Grimpen told me that they just don't care about the everyday world. It's like we don't exist to them."

The monks even ignored the brain spiders that scurried into their midst, forcing Zak and Tash to run once more. No escape.

The Arrandas managed to evade the mechanical spiders for a few more minutes, but finally, they made a wrong turn. They faced a stone wall.

"Dead end," Zak groaned.

"Let's go back," Tash urged.

They turned, but it was too late.

The hallway behind them was filled with brain spiders.

Click-click-click!

A dozen sets of metal legs scraped the tile as they charged forward. Zak and Tash tensed, expecting to be torn to ribbons.

At the last moment, a blur of grayish brown appeared in the corridor. Whatever it was, it moved fast, and it was so tall its

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head nearly scraped the ceiling of the tunnel. When it finally slowed enough to be seen clearly, Zak and Tash were staring at the last thing they expected to see in the tunnels beneath the desert planet. It was a tauntaun—a giant snow lizard, a creature that could not have survived for more than few minutes on the surface of Tatooine.

The tauntaun crashed into the brain spiders, knocking the legs out from under them with huge swipes of its powerful tail. When the brain spiders continued to press in, the tauntaun suddenly shape-shifted into a thick, muscled humanoid called a Gank. The broad-shouldered Gank lifted the spiders and tossed them against the walls.

The brain spiders retreated. In moments, the hallway was clear.

The Gank turned to look at Zak and Tash. Its skin crawled across its bones, and a moment later it had changed into the shape of a Shi'ido.

"It is a good thing I came to look for you," Hoole said.

"I did not think brain spiders acted in that fashion."

"I told you one of them chased me," Zak said.

"Are either of you hurt?" Hoole asked.

Both humans held out their hands and arms to show that they hadn't been cut. "They never really touched us," Tash explained. "It was more like they were herding us somewhere. They were trying to trap us."

"Intriguing," Hoole said. "But it does not matter. We won't be here much longer."

"Did you finish translating those B'omarr documents?" Tash asked.

Hoole shook his head. "Not completely. But I have decided not to accept Jabba's offer. I simply cannot take on a new identity."

Zak knew the reason, but Tash asked, "Why not?"

Hoole explained, "To a Shi'ido like me, identity is everything. I must always remember who I am. Otherwise, with all the

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shape-changing I do, I am in danger of forgetting who I really am."

"You mean, if you shape-shifted into a Gank, you might forget you weren't *really* a Gank?" Tash asked.

"Exactly." The Shi'ido suddenly morphed with such blinding speed that Tash and Zak caught only glimpses of wings, and fur, and claws, and tails, and beaks, and teeth in a blur of motion. For a moment, Hoole paused, settling on the form of a vornskr, a furry four-legged predator with a poison tail. The fierce creature nipped at Zak and Tash, then changed shape again. When the morphing stopped, Hoole stood before them. "It's important always to remember exactly who you are."

"So we're leaving now?" Tash asked. "But... I don't think I'm ready."

"Not ready?" Zak replied in disbelief. "After what just happened?"

"Well, it's not like I want to see brain spiders again, but Grimpen was teaching me so much. I can't leave without saying good-bye."

Hoole considered. "Very well. It is too late to leave tonight anyway. Jabba would be insulted if I didn't say goodbye properly. But I want to make sure nothing else happens to you, Tash."

"I'll be safe," she explained. "The tunnel to Grimpen's meditation chamber is just down that way, and there's a bed of hot coals that the brain spiders can't cross."

"Yes, they can," Zak scoffed, remembering Hoole's comment about the lume rocks. "Remind me to tell you about those so-called hot coals sometime. They wouldn't stop a brain spider for a second."

Tash shrugged. "Well, whether they can or can't, I know that they *don't* cross it. They absolutely refuse. So I'll be safe."

She hurried down the tunnel, with Hoole watching until she was out of sight. He seemed about to change his mind and go after her, when a loud noise drifted down the tunnels. Hoole and

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Zak heard music and cheering. Something big was happening in Jabba's audience chamber.

Glancing back at Tash, Hoole turned up the hall to investigate.

They reached the audience chamber a few minutes later to find all of Jabba's henchmen gathered around his throne, accompanied by the Imperial officer Commander Fuzzel and a squad of stormtroopers.

Fuzzel shouted over the noise, "Jabba! You promised me the criminal! What are we waiting for?"

Jabba blinked his huge eyes. "Patience, Commander, patience. There is merely a short delay in fetching the body. It will arrive any moment now."

The stormtroopers looked around nervously. They were uncomfortable being surrounded by so many gangsters. As Hoole and Zak watched, Jabba kept them waiting for nearly a quarter of an hour longer. Just as Zak was starting to grow bored, a murmur swept through the crowd.

Bib Fortuna pushed his way through the mob, guiding a small hoversled. On the hoversled lay a body wrapped in sheets.

Jabba boomed, "As I promised you, Commander Fuzzel, I have delivered the body of the galaxy's most wanted killer. Here is all that remains of Karkas!"

The mob cackled and cheered. Fuzzel stepped forward and pulled back the sheet, revealing a massive head with one crushed eye.

"This is Karkas, all right," Fuzzel said, shaking his head. "That makes five criminals you've turned in this month. You've started up a whole new line of work, Jabba."

"Indeed I have," the Hutt gurgled.

At the edge of the crowd, Zak whispered to Hoole, "I don't get it. When I saw Jabba talking with Karkas yesterday, they were the best of friends. Jabba even promised to help him escape from the Imperials."

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"Never trust the promise of a Hutt," Hoole whispered back. "Especially when that Hutt is Jabba."

As the cheering died down, Commander Fuzzel asked, "Just one question, Jabba. What happened to his head?"

"What?" the crime lord rumbled.

Commander Fuzzel pointed down at the body of Karkas. "What happened to his head?"

The Hutt sputtered, "Karkas had one crushed eye. Everyone knows that. He's had it for years."

"Not that," the Imperial said. "This!"

He pointed down to a long scar on the side of the killer's head. It looked as if someone had slashed him with a vibroblade, except that the cut was very thin and clean.

Jabba shrugged his thick, meaty shoulders. "Karkas must have sustained some injuries when my men took him down. Nothing to worry about. Now, about my money?"

Fuzzel replied, "Yes, yes, you'll get the reward. But I'll tell you this, " the Imperial officer added as his men carted the body away, "Karkas is lucky you found him first. If I'd gotten my hands on him, I'd have given him a lot worse than a cut on the back of the skull!"

Jabba's henchmen howled with laughter at the thought of this fat Imperial official trying to take down a killer like Karkas.

"Come along, Zak," Hoole said, "this is not the time to speak with Jabba. I'll say good-bye in the morning. Let's make sure Tash is all right."

Returning to their rooms, Zak saw that his door was open. Tash was inside, stuffing her few belongings into her pack.

"Wouldn't you know it," Zak said. "We don't leave till morning and you're already packed!"

Tash hardly looked at him. "Yeah. Just like me."

Zak shrugged. "I'm not going to pack until later. You want to do something?"

"No," Tash replied.

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"Come on," he urged. "We can even do something you want to do. Something grown up, like reading in the monks' library."

Tash snorted. "Why in the name of all the black holes in the galaxy would I wanna hang out with a bunch of frag eating monks?"

Zak's jaw dropped. "What?"

Tash paused. "Urn... nothing. Just mind your own business, kid."

"'Kid'?" Zak snapped. "Why are you back to calling me *kid* again?" He stepped closer to her and looked over her shoulder. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Sure I am," Tash muttered. "Now, get your nose outta my business."

Zak wrinkled his brow. "Why are you talking so funny? Hey, I thought we just made friends again. Why don't you look at me?"

He grabbed her arm.

Tash's reaction was sudden and violent. She whirled around, grabbed Zak by the collar of his tunic, and drove him backward, slamming him against the wall.

"Listen, I ain't got no friends," Tash growled. "Whatever I said before, I was just being nice. I didn't mean it. And if you ever touch me again, I'll eat you for breakfast."

Chapter Thirteen

That night, Zak lay on his bed, drifting in and out of sleep.

He and Tash had not said a word to each other after her outburst, and soon after that Tash had muttered something about feeling like a herd of banthas were stomping through her head. She had crawled into bed and fallen into a dead sleep.

Zak had lain awake for several hours, until a fitful sleep took him. But still his mind replayed the earlier scene over and over. Why had Tash acted like that?

She's been acting strange for days, he reminded himself.

But not like this. Not violent.

She's just going through changes, he replied to his doubts.

Well, if these are the changes, I don't like them.

Remember what Uncle Hoole said. Look for the real Tash. She's in there somewhere.

Zak thought about it, but he couldn't find anything. The Tash he knew was nothing like this one.

The sheets on the bed across the room suddenly billowed up. Zak froze. Tash sat up and stared at him for a moment, as though making sure he was asleep. Zak did his best to breathe regularly, the way a sleeping person did.

Tash got out of bed and quietly pulled on her flight suit. Then, a moment later, she slipped out the door.

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What is she doing?

As quickly and quietly as he could, Zak followed her.

Jabba's palace was as quiet as a graveyard. Zak walked on tiptoes as he trailed his sister, who hurried through the many halls of the fortress. She soon reached a section of the palace where neither she nor Zak had been, yet she seemed to know it well. Without missing a step, she went straight through a door that led into an enormous docking bay. On one side of the chamber sat an enormous sail barge, a floating yacht that Jabba used to cruise the desert sand. Beside it, Jabba's hirelings had parked rows of smaller landspeeders and hovercraft. In one corner, in a stall, two dewbacks shuffled. They snorted wearily as they heard people approach. It was far too late to be ridden.

Tash walked straight to one of the landspeeders, hopped inside, and started the repulsor engines.

She's stealing a speeder! Zak was stunned.

A moment later, Tash guided the speeder toward the exit doors, which slid back.

"Tash, wait!" Zak suddenly yelled. "Where are you going?"

She didn't hear him. His voice was drowned out by the whine of the speeder as it roared away.

Zak thought about going back to get Uncle Hoole. But if he did, he would lose Tash's trail. Instead, he ran his eyes over the speeders parked in the docking bay. He didn't know how to fly any of them.

"Now's a good time to learn," he said, hopping into the driver's seat of the nearest speeder.

How hard can it be? he thought as he powered up the small hovercar. He was an expert on his skimboard, and once, with Tash's help, he'd even flown Han Solo's *Millennium Falcon*. Besides, he was no stranger to machines like this—he could take apart this speeder's engine and put it back together in a flash.

Zak pointed the speeder toward the door and hit the accelerator.

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The speeder took off. In the wrong direction.

The back of the speeder slammed against the docking-bay wall, making enough noise to wake the dead—which was what Zak would be if Jabba's thugs caught him stealing a vehicle.

"Let's try that again," he grumbled. Flipping a switch, he touched the accelerator. This time, the speeder glided smoothly toward the open door.

Once he was out in the clear desert air, Zak could see the lights of Tash's speeder twinkling like one of the many stars overhead. But she had a huge lead on him, and she'd soon be out of sight.

That's okay, Zak thought. I know where she's headed. Tash may spend more time studying maps and reading books, but if I remember right, there's only one town in the direction she's going.

That town was Mos Eisley.

Zak spent the first part of his journey enjoying the power and speed of the landspeeder. It was even more exciting than riding his skimboard. "I could get used to this," he told himself, smiling. Soon, however, he was shivering. As hot as Tatooine was during the day, at night the desert was cold.

By the time Zak glided into the town, even Mos Eisley was asleep. The streets were deserted. All but the most popular cantinas were closed.

Parking the speeder, Zak jumped out and looked around. He had no idea where to begin. Mos Eisley was a big place, and Tash must have arrived long before he did. She could be long gone by now.

But she wasn't. Zak spotted her landspeeder parked near a low, single-story cantina. A hum of voices came from within, accompanied by the slow notes of a tired band playing songs late into the night.

Zak stopped at the doorway. They probably wouldn't let him in...and he wasn't sure he wanted to go in anyway.

The idea of entering a Mos Eisley cantina this late at night was about as appealing as the idea of playing tag with a rancor.

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Zak was about to turn back when a startled cry reached his ears. It had come from outside the cantina, around the corner.

Creeping forward, Zak heard his sister's voice speak in angry tones: "I hear you were dying to find me. Well, here I am!"

The cry was followed by a sharp *crack!* and someone cried, "N-No! No!"

The cries faded into silence.

Zak ran to the corner and peeked around. He was looking down an alleyway next to the cantina. In the gloom, he could just make out the figure of Tash standing over a large pile of something on the ground. At least, he *thought* it was Tash. Even with so many stars shining, he couldn't be sure it was her. She stooped down over the object on the ground for a moment, then stood up and hurried away.

As soon as she was gone, Zak moved forward to investigate.

He reached the pile and nearly tripped over it. It was much bigger than he thought. In fact, it wasn't a pile at all. It was a body!

Zak recognized the face. It belonged to the Imperial officer, Commander Fuzzel. He was dead. Bending closer, Zak saw something on the dead man's forehead.

The letter *K* had been carved into his skull.

Chapter Fourteen

"Help! Murder!"

Zak's cry drifted over the rooftops of Mos Eisley.

Hardly anyone responded. A few heads poked out of windows. Some yelled, "Shut up!" No one bothered to come outside. This was Mos Eisley. Nighttime cries for help were all too common.

"These people are worse than the B'omarr monks!" Zak spat. "These people are just——"

He didn't know what they were. He'd have to ask Tash for the right word.

"Tash," he wondered aloud. "What's going on?"

By the time Zak left the alley, the speeder was gone. Tash must have doubled back or gone through the cantina to reach the front of the building.

Zak thought of the letter *K* cut into Fuzzel's forehead. That was the mark Karkas left on all his victims. But Karkas was dead——Zak had seen the body with his own eyes.

Stranger still, what had Tash been doing standing over the corpse?

There were only two possible answers. Either Tash had found the body, or Tash had killed Fuzzel. Zak knew the second choice

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couldn't be true. But why had Tash stolen a landspeeder and come all the way to Mos Eisley?

There was only one way to find out.

By the time Zak guided his landspeeder back to Jabba's palace, the twin suns of Tatooine were already boiling over the horizon.

By now the guards recognized him, and Zak was allowed back into the palace. He went straight to his quarters. Quietly looking into Hoole's room, he saw that his uncle had just risen. Tiptoeing back into his own room, he saw that Tash, too, was awake. She looked a little bleary-eyed, but there was nothing else to suggest that she'd been out most of the night.

Zak got straight to the point. "What were you doing in Mos Eisley?"

Tash looked at him innocently. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your trip into town!" Zak retorted. "Not to mention the fact that you took a landspeeder without permission, and that you walked away from a dead body!"

For a fraction of a second, Tash looked surprised. "You've got a black hole in your brain. I've been here all night."

Zak snorted. "Come on, Tash, you can tell me. I'll bet this was another one of Grimpen's B'omarr tests. But even you should have called it off when you saw that Commander Fuzzel had been killed."

Tash's glare was like the blast of a turbolaser. "I told you," she growled in an eerily low voice, "I was here all night."

Hoole glided into the room. "We will leave shortly," he said, then noticed the strange looks passing between Tash and Zak.

"Everything's fine," Tash said. "I'll be right back."

Zak waited until she had left the room. "Uncle Hoole, Tash is acting really weird again."

"I thought we had already discussed that," Hoole said flatly.

"No, I mean she's acting *really* strange. Wait till I tell you——"

"Forgive me, Zak. I do want to hear what you have to say," the Shi'ido said, "but I think it is wise to leave here as soon as

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possible. Once we are safely off Tatooine, then we can deal with Tash's behavior. Until then, we should make it our primary goal to leave Jabba's palace as soon as possible. I am going to pay my respects to Jabba. Please be ready when I return."

When Hoole left, Zak found himself standing alone in his quarters. He looked at his pack sitting at the foot of his bed.

"You'll have to pit wait," he muttered as he took off after Tash.

As before, Tash was easy to follow. She strode through Jabba's palace with ease. She obviously wasn't expecting anyone to follow, because she never once looked back.

Her course took her past Jabba's throne room and down a wide corridor. This hallway was decorated with holo-pictures and statues—all of Jabba himself.

This must be Jabba's private quarters, Zak guessed. Only a Hutt would have an ego big enough to cover his walls with pictures of himself.

At the end of the hall stood a high, wide door. Four Gamorrean guards sat on either side, snorting and snuffling at each other. As Tash approached, one of the guards jumped up and waddled over to a control panel. The door slid open, and Tash walked calmly inside.

Now what? Zak wondered.

Boldly, he strode up to the door as well. This time all four Gamorreans jumped to their feet. They brandished their vibro-axes and snorted angrily in his direction. One of the guards jabbed at him with an ax.

"All right!" Zak said, jumping back. "I get the hint." He hurried away before he could attract any more attention.

As he retreated down the hallway, Zak tried to put together the pieces of this strange puzzle. But there were too many. First there was Beidlo's idea that the B'omarr monks were performing unnecessary brain transfers. Then Beidlo had said he'd been mistaken. Then there was the attack of the brain spiders. That was almost as strange as Jabba, who first promised to help the killer Karkas and then turned his dead body in to Commander

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Fuzzel. Then, that very night, Fuzzel was murdered—— apparently by Karkas, who was supposed to be dead.

Click-click-click...

Zak's mind reeled. "The only thing that's stayed the same," he muttered, "is that Tash has been acting weird. But not *this* weird!"

Click-click-click...

Zak was so lost in thought that he didn't see the brain spider until it was on top of him. When those spidery legs came into view, he leaped backward, bumping into something hard and sharp.

There was another brain spider behind him.

"Oh, no!" Zak gasped. He closed his eyes so he wouldn't see the deathblow coming.

But the spiders didn't attack him. Instead, they pushed forward gently on their durasteel legs, nudging him.

"Hey, watch it," he said, looking at the brains inside each droid. Each brain looked like a round pile of thick noodles.

The spiders pushed again, and again, until Zak realized that they weren't trying to hurt him. They were pushing him toward one side of the corridor. They were herding him, just as Tash had said before.

Not wanting to feel those sharp legs on his skin, Zak went in the direction the brain spiders were shoving him. He saw a small hatch set into the wall——the kind of small door that maintenance workers use to get into tight spaces in a building. One of the spiders scurried forward and tapped at the door with a foreleg.

"You want me to open it?" Zak asked.

He deactivated the lock, and the automatic door popped open. A sharp poke in the back from one of the spiders made him jump and sent him stumbling into the maintenance hall.

The floor was covered with sand, like a mini-desert probably the leftovers from years of sweeping out Jabba's hallways.

The spiders crept forward, forcing Zak to go farther down the sandy hallway.

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"Look, I don't know what you want," Zak said. He didn't know if the brains inside the spiders could hear or understand him, but it was worth a try. "I thought you B'omarr monk brains were supposed to contemplate the universe or something—not pick on Jabba's guests."

"Hoohooohoo!"

Zak blinked. Were the brain spiders laughing? "Hoohoo!"

No, that laughter belonged to Jabba the Hutt! It was coming from overhead. Zak looked up. About two meters up the wall of the maintenance hall was a vent. The Hutt's deep laughter was trickling through it.

One of the brain spiders moved beneath the vent and lowered itself so that it sat on the floor.

Zak quickly figured out what it wanted. "You're offering me a boost?"

He stepped onto the spider-droid's back, careful to avoid the glass jar containing the wrinkled brain. With a whine of servos, the brain spider rose to its normal height, lifting Zak up to the vent.

Zak peeked through the tiny metal grate.

He was looking inside Jabba's private chambers! What he saw amazed him.

Jabba the Hutt reclined on a wide couch, rolls of fat rising and falling across the length of his body.

Nearby sat Tash. She had her feet up on a table covered with strange and exotic foods. As Zak watched, she reached into a bowl full of live eels. Fishing one out, she opened her mouth wide and dropped the wriggling creature in. The eel's tail flapped once as it struggled to escape; then Tash swallowed it with a contented sigh.

Jabba growled, "I notice that the credits still have not been sent to my account."

Tash nodded. "That's right, Jabba. You're not getting your money until we fix this problem."

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"I already explained," the crime lord said as he smacked his lips. "Someone freed the prisoner we had reserved for you. We had no other choice, especially with the Imperials approaching."

"Yeah, but now I'm stuck with this!" Tash said, pointing at herself

"Look on the bright side," the Hutt gurgled in amusement, "no Imperials will ever stop you again."

"Very funny," Tash snapped back. "But I'm telling you I want this fixed, and fixed now!"

Jabba checked a small datascreen near his couch. "Ah, just the message I was waiting for. Don't worry, my friend. I have the perfect solution. Right this way."

The Hutt slithered off his couch and Tash stood up. Together, they moved out of Zak's view. A moment later he heard a door open and close.

Jumping down from the brain spider's back, Zak rubbed his forehead. He was getting a headache. "What in all the galaxy is going on here?"

The brain spider that had lifted him now extended one of its legs. The leg made a few slow, small movements in the sand. But the motion was clumsy—the spider's legs weren't made for such delicate action.

After several tries, the spider finally succeeded in moving its leg the way it wanted. Finally, when it was satisfied, the brain spider stepped back and let Zak see its work.

Zak's heart froze and his blood went cold in his veins.

In a jagged, uneven style, the brain spider had written two words.

I'M TASH.

Chapter Fifteen

I'M TASH.

The words lay in the sand. The brain spider danced back and forth on its spindly legs.

"I-I don't understand," Zak stammered. He had just seen Tash talking with Jabba!

No.

He had seen Tash's *body* talking with Jabba.

Zak looked at the brain spider. He looked at the brain inside the jar.

Tash's brain.

It all made sense to him now. The B'omarr monks had removed Tash's brain and put it into a brain spider. Then they had put someone else's brain into her body!

Zak recalled the letter *K* on Fuzzel's skull.

It was Karkas.

Jabba hadn't killed him. He had put the killer's brain in Tash's head, then given Karkas's body to the Imperials.

"Of course," Zak said in a frightened whisper. "That's been Jabba's plan all along. He hasn't been turning in wanted criminals to the authorities. He's been giving them new bodies! The criminals pay Jabba and leave Tatooine with completely new

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identities. Jabba gives their old bodies to the Imperials and collects even more credits!"

It all made sense. Beidlo had been right. The monks were performing too many operations! And they weren't always using other monks. That was why that prisoner had been held in Jabba's dungeon. Jabba was using anyone he could find to provide bodies for his customers!

Zak felt a sudden pang of guilt. He remembered the words Jabba had just spoken: *Someone freed the prisoner we had reserved for you.*

Zak had freed the prisoner. And because he had let the captive go, Jabba had needed another body for Karkas. Tash's body.

"I'm sorry, Tash," Zak said to the brain spider. "It's my fault."

The brain spider hopped up and down excitedly as if to say, *Don't apologize. Do something!*

Another brain spider shuffled forward, bobbing up and down on its mechanical legs. Staring at the other brain, Zak had a strange feeling he knew who it was.

"Beidlo," he whispered. "You're in there."

The brain spider bobbed rapidly.

Zak held back angry tears. Jabba had given the young monk's body to some other criminal. That was why the fake Beidlo had denied his story in front of Uncle Hoole.

"Uncle Hoole," Zak said. "I've got to tell Uncle Hoole!"

Zak knew he could easily outrun the brain spiders, so he said, "Don't follow me. Meet me at the entrance to the B'omarr tunnels."

He hurried out of the maintenance hall and into the main corridor. He didn't care who saw him sprint full speed through the palace and back to his quarters.

But their rooms were empty. Hoole had not returned. Turning back, Zak sprinted again, this time for Jabba's throne room. It, too, was empty.

Where now? Zak thought.

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There were only the B'omarr monks left, but Zak couldn't go to them because they were performing the operations for Jabba. Getting help from the monks was out of the question.

Or was it?

There was Grimpen. Tash liked him, and Tash's intuitions usually proved reliable. Besides, Grimpen had been different from the other monks—less dark and brooding. Beidlo had mentioned something about asking for his help, but obviously he had been captured before he got the chance.

There was no one else to turn to. Zak took a deep breath and raced off again.

By the time he reached the tunnels, Tash and Beidlo inside their brain spiders—were there. Zak had lost his fear of the brain spiders. He was sure now that the spiders that had seemed to attack him earlier had just been more of Jabba's victims, trying desperately to communicate with someone who might help them.

Zak looked at the globe of gray, wrinkled flesh inside the brain spider's jar and shuddered. He had to remind himself that that was his sister. "Tash, I need help. Can you lead me to Grimpen?"

The brain spiders bobbed up and down excitedly, but made no other move.

Zak tried again. "I need to find Grimpen. You've been to his quarters more often than I have. Which way are they?"

The two spiders shuffled from side to side, but then returned to their original spots. Zak scratched his head. Maybe Tash couldn't hear him.

He shrugged. He'd have to find Grimpen on his own.

Tash and Beidlo followed as Zak hurried through the maze of passageways, trying to remember the way to Grimpen's meditation chamber. Finally, he found the long, dark hallway, with the faint glow of the coal bed in the distance.

By now, Zak was so panic-stricken and desperate for help that he didn't notice the brain spiders behind him. If he had looked back, he would have seen them stop. They refused to go farther.

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Instead, they danced back and forth frantically, trying to get his attention.

But he was running too quickly to notice.

A few more moments brought Zak to the edge of the glowing rocks. He didn't even hesitate.

"Lume rocks," he muttered, remembering what Uncle Hoole had told him. "Not even warm."

He churned up piles of glowing stones as he ran across the bed and reached the other side.

Beyond the bed of lume rocks, Zak found the door to a monk's cell. It opened automatically and Zak stepped inside.

Grimpen sat on a short, wide platform. His face was very calm. He smiled at Zak. "Hello, Zak. I've been expecting you."

"Y-You have?" Zak panted, trying to catch his breath. Grimpen nodded. "I know why you have come," the monk said distantly. "I know many things."

Zak nodded. "Then Tash must have figured out a way to tell you, too. Did she warn you?"

"Warn me?" Grimpen replied. "Tash has warned me of nothing."

"What is it then?" Zak gasped. "Part of your enlightenment? Is that how you know about Jabba's brain transfers?"

Grimpen chuckled. "Of course not. I know about Jabba's brain transfers because I'm the one who's been performing them."

Chapter Sixteen

Zak backed away in horror, but Grimpen was faster. The monk lunged for ward and grabbed Zak's arm. His grip felt as strong as a Wookiee's.

"Now, now, there's no need to be afraid," Grimpen scolded. "Soon enough Jabba will have another customer in need of a new identity, and then we'll have use for you. You should consider it an honor." Grimpen laughed. "Kept alive inside a spider, your brain will have centuries to contemplate the universe."

Keeping a viselike grip on Zak's arm, Grimpen dragged him out of the meditation chamber. "Come along. I have an appointment. I think you'll want to be there."

Grimpen stomped over the lume rocks. "I suppose you know about these," he said with a laugh. "You'd be amazed how often that trick works. It gets my victims to think they really are enlightened. I just throw a few such simple tests their way, and when they pass, they think they're ready to solve the mysteries of the universe!"

Zak winced at the pain in his arm. "That Sarlacc test wasn't so easy."

"Of course it was," Grimpen mocked. "The Sarlacc wouldn't have bothered Tash if you hadn't been so clumsy. Anyway, your sister was already convinced she was going to be the greatest

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thinker in the galaxy. That only made things easier for me. Half the time, my subjects are so convinced that they're enlightened, they don't even put up a struggle when I scoop out their brains!"

Grimpen strode through the main halls of the B'omarr monks, dragging Zak with him. The brain spiders——Tash and Beidlo——jabbed at Grimpen with their metal legs, but the monk brushed them aside.

They reached the portal Zak had seen on his first day. Beyond it lay the Great Room of the Enlightened, where they'd stumbled on the monks performing the brain operation. The walls were covered with shelves, and the shelves were filled with jars, and the jars were filled with brains floating in chemical soup.

This time Zak got a closer look at the table in the center of the room. There were leather restraints attached to each corner. Beside the table sat a tray of medical instruments. Some of them were modern tools——laser-needles and vibroscalpels. But there were older, more wicked-looking tools as well——blades with jagged edges, and a heavy saw.

"For sawing through the skull," Grimpen explained. "Very difficult."

Keeping one hand on Zak, Grimpen pulled a handheld vidscreen from his robes. As it powered up, Zak could see the fleshy face of Jabba the Hutt on the small monitor.

"Jabba," Grimpen said, "I'm in the Great Room. I'm ready to operate."

"Your patient is on his way," the crime lord boomed over the speaker. "The sooner the better. I want Karkas's credits!"

"I have the Arranda child as well," Grimpen added.

"Good!" Jabba crowed. "I'm sure we can make use of his body. But only after we're done with the other victim I'm sending you."

Zak looked around desperately. There was nothing in the room to use as a weapon. He wished for the rusty knife, but he'd left it sticking in the Sarlacc's tentacle.

Footsteps approached the Great Room.

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"Ah, here comes our patient now," Grimpen said.

Everything's going to be all right, Zak told himself, staring at the floor. Things have been worse. Uncle Hoole is still out there somewhere, and he always appears at the last minute. He always saves us.

"Welcome," Grimpen said.

Zak looked up. Tash had entered the room, accompanied by two Gamorrean guards. Not Tash, Zak reminded himself, but the killer Karkas in Tash's body. She-he——was guiding a small hoversled.

Come on, Uncle Hoole, Zak thought. Where are you?

As the hoversled approached, Zak saw that someone lay on it. That someone was Hoole.

Chapter Seventeen

Hoole lay unconscious on the hoversled. He was the other victim Jabba had mentioned. Zak moaned. For the first time, he realized that he might have failed. He would end up trapped inside a jar until the end of time.

"They're here," Grimpen said. "I'll call you again after the operation. Grimpen out." He snapped the vidscreen shut.

Grimpen nodded to Karkas. "Did you have any trouble?"

Karkas, behind Tash's face, smirked. "Not much. This girl's body is weaker than a nerf cub. But the Shi'ido wasn't expecting to get brained by his own niece." Karkas laughed with Tash's clear laugh. "Get it? *Brained!*"

"Humorous," Grimpen said dryly. "Are you ready?"

Karkas snorted. "I can't wait to get out of this stupid body." The criminal leered over Hoole's unconscious figure. "This one will do much better. And the best part of it is, no one will ever suspect that Karkas the killer is hiding inside a Shi'ido."

Zak shuddered. They were going to perform another brain transfer and put Karkas's brain inside Hoole's body. Would that mean that Karkas would have Hoole's shape-changing power? Did the Shi'ido ability come from the body or from the mind? Hoole had never told them.

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"Here, watch the boy," Grimpen said. He shoved Zak toward Karkas. The killer grabbed Zak with Tash's hand, drawing a blaster with the other.

For a second, Zak considered fighting back. Karkas was a killer who had terrorized the galaxy, but right now he was trapped in the body of a thirteen year-old girl. Zak wasn't quite as tall as Tash, but he was strong, and he was more of an athlete than Tash was. He was sure he could beat her.

But as soon as Karkas clutched him, Zak abandoned the idea. The hand on his arm was Tash's hand, but it wasn't. They were her fingers, but the grip felt nothing like hers. It was hard and mean. Zak could tell that if he made any sudden moves, Karkas would kill him without a thought.

Besides, even if he could wrestle free, he would still have to deal with Grimpen and the two Gamorrean guards.

The monk positioned the hoversled next to the table. With the help of Jabba's Gamorreans, he slid Hoole onto the operating table and then bound his hands and feet with the leather straps.

"One cannot be too careful," he observed as he began to sort through the trayful of instruments. "I think I'll do this the old-fashioned way," he said, casually picking up the skull saw.

"No!" Zak yelled.

Grimpen only smiled. He lowered the saw until its sharp teeth rested on Hoole's forehead.

Hoole's eyes flew open.

One of the Gamorreans snorted.

"He's awake!" Karkas yelled.

"It's of no concern," Grimpen assured him. "I've had several patients wake during the brain transfer. He's securely tied down."

Karkas lunged forward, aiming the blaster. "No, you idiot. He's a Shi——*aahh!*"

His warning turned into a cry of surprise as Zak tripped him up. Tash's body sprawled onto the stone floor of the Great Room of the Enlightened.

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On the table, Hoole tugged once at his restraints and then closed his eyes. His entire body shifted and collapsed on itself, morphing into the form of a Circapousian water snake. The snake slithered easily out of the straps and dropped onto the floor as the Gamorreans squealed and jumped back in surprise. They recovered quickly, and both guards chopped down with their axes. But Hoole changed shape again, this time becoming a tall, thin-bodied Duro. The axes passed harmlessly on either side of him and struck the floor in a shower of sparks.

A few meters away, Zak dove on top of Karkas, struggling to gain control of the blaster. He managed to pin down the hand that held the blaster, but he didn't know what to do next. He was fighting his own sister!

Karkas lashed out with a savage elbow that snapped Zak's head backward. For a moment the blaster came free, and Karkas leveled the weapon at Hoole.

"No!" Zak shouted. He punched as hard as he could, hitting the side of Tash's face. The blow made the blaster shot go wide, slamming into the wall and shattering a shelf full of brain jars. Yellow-green chemicals and gray brains oozed down the walls and onto the floor.

Near the shelf, Hoole shifted again. He became a vornskr, leaping forward on all four feet, his poison tail whipping behind him. The vornskr lunged at a Gamorrean, jaws snapping. At the same time, its tail lashed out at the other guard, slashing the guard's snout.

The first guard struck back with his ax, but the vornskr easily dodged away, then snapped the ax handle in half with one bite of its jaws.

Weaponless, the Gamorrean fled in terror. The vornskr turned back to its first opponent, but the guard, stunned by the poison, had already fallen to the ground.

Zak was still on the ground, too. Now he was throwing punches. It was Tash's face he was hitting, but his blows were

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rattling Karka's brain. The killer blacked out and the blaster dropped from his hand.

Zak's heart was still racing from his fight with Karkas. He scrambled to his feet, aiming the blaster at Grimpen. "Don't move or I'll enlighten you in a whole new way."

Grimpen kept as still as stone.

Hoole, back in his own shape, walked over to Zak's side. Zak said, "I'm so glad you woke up."

Hoole nodded. "I was never really unconscious. I only pretended to let Karkas overpower me. I could not make a move with Jabba's personal army all around."

"You mean, you knew it wasn't Tash?" Zak said, startled.

"Only at the last moment," the Shi'ido confessed. "I took my own advice when I noticed how extremely odd she was acting. I could not find the real Tash in her, so I became suspicious. Of course, I did not know the whole story until Karkas brought me down here." He looked proudly at Zak. "You, however, found out on your own. Excellent work."

"Thanks, Uncle Hoole," Zak said. "For a minute there I thought you were dead. Looks like you've saved us again." He pointed at Grimpen. "But now what? "

"I suggest that we——" Hoole started to say, then stopped.

B'omarr monks were gliding into the room on quiet feet. The first few monks moved quickly to the damaged shelves, gathering up the brains that had burst free of their jars. Carefully, the monks collected the brains in deep pans, pouring liquid over them. But as more monks entered the chamber, they turned toward the intruders. First a few, then a dozen, then twenty, then so many Zak lost count. The brown-robed monks formed a circle around Zak, Hoole, and Grimpen.

They were surrounded.

Chapter Eighteen

"What do you want?" Hoole demanded.

One of the monks stepped forward. "This must end. Your presence has caused great disturbance."

"Don't blame us, blame him," Zak said, pointing at Grimpen.

The monk who had spoken bowed his head once in acknowledgment. "He has given our secrets to outsiders. He shall be punished."

"You won't do anything to me," Grimpen snarled. "Jabba will have your heads!"

The monk nodded to some of his brothers. At his silent command, several of the B'omarr surrounded Grimpen.

"What? No!" Grimpen cried. His shouts were suddenly muffled as he vanished behind a curtain of brown robes.

Zak did not see them take the treacherous monk out of the room. Grimpen simply vanished.

The first monk turned back to Hoole and Zak. "Now go," he ordered them.

"Wait." Hoole pointed at the two brain spiders that had been lurking in the shadows. "We need your help. My niece is trapped inside that brain spider. You must return her to her own body."

The monk paused. "For what purpose? In this state she may achieve enlightenment."

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The spider droid holding Tash's brain scuttled to and fro frantically. It was easy to see what she was saying: *No, no!*

"She's not a monk," Hoole argued. "She is not prepared for this kind of enlightenment."

The speaker intoned, "The universe moves as it will. We have no interest in undoing what has been done. We do not take interest in the actions of outsiders."

Hoole, however, was not finished with them. He pulled a tube from the pocket of his robe. Popping the cap off the end of the tube, he withdrew a scroll. "Then perhaps you will take an interest in this."

A murmur rippled through the crowd of monks—the loudest noise they had made in all that time. They recognized what Hoole was holding.

It was the scroll Jabba had stolen.

"You value your secrets," Hoole said. "Then let us make a bargain. If you return my niece to her natural state, I will give the scroll back to you. If you refuse, I will spread the contents of this scroll from one end of the galaxy to the other. Everyone will know how you sometimes use tricks to attract students. Worse still, the entire galaxy will know your secrets for brain transference."

The monks had no choice but to agree. They quickly set to work, preparing Tash's body and making sure her brain was still healthy inside the spider.

"What about Jabba?" Zak considered. "He's up there waiting for a call from Grimpen."

Hoole shrugged. "Then Grimpen shall call him."

The Shi'ido took the mini-vidscreen that Grimpen had left behind and shifted into Grimpen's shape. He activated the vidscreen.

Jabba's face materialized on the monitor. "How did the operation go?"

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"Everything has turned out very well," said Hoole in Grimpen's form. "Give me a short time, and I'll be done. I'm sure you'll be surprised at the results. Grimpen out."

Epilogue

"Starship *Shroud*, you are cleared for takeoff," said a voice over the loudspeaker.

"Affirmative, traffic control," Hoole replied. "Preparing to launch."

The Shi'ido turned to Zak and Tash. "Are you strapped in?"

"Ready," they both said.

As they waited for takeoff, Zak looked out over the city of Mos Eisley.

"Do you think Beidlo will be all right?" he wondered.

Tash shrugged. "I hope so. His body was gone, so his brain had to stay in the brain spider. But he wasn't like me. He wanted to have his brain transferred someday. The monks will help him adjust to his new life."

Zak turned to check on his sister one more time. The monks had done their work well, and Tash looked as if she'd never been through the amazing procedure. The monks were so skilled, in fact, that there weren't even any scars left over from the operation. The only physical proof that she'd been through anything at all was the set of bruises Zak had pounded into her body.

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"I wouldn't want to make a brain spider my permanent home, but it wasn't that bad," Tash continued. "I could sort of see and hear through the droid's sensors, but it was all foggy."

She paused.

"Of course, I guess my senses were kind of foggy even before that. Zak, I'm sorry I didn't see through Grimpen's flattery right away. I'm also sorry about... about everything. I hope you weren't too mad."

Zak laughed. "I'm over it. Besides, how often does a guy get to pummel his own snobby sister and come out looking like a hero?"

Tash groaned as the ship lifted off and headed into infinite space.

Below Jabba's palace, in the Great Room of the Enlightened, Jabba roared at the row of monks standing before him. He yelled so loudly that the hundreds of brain jars on the walls shook.

"Where is Grimpen?" the Hutt demanded. "Where is Karkas?"

The monks said nothing.

"I could have you all vaporized!" Jabba threatened.

"The universe moves as it will," one of the monks responded.

Jabba fumed. He would not kill them all. He needed them to find Grimpen. Grimpen was the only monk willing to reveal their secrets.

"Someday I'll find him," Jabba declared as he turned and slithered away. "Someday."

The monks watched him depart. Above their heads, on the fourth shelf from the top, in the third jar from the left, one of the brains almost seemed to shudder frantically in its pool of yellow-green chemicals.

I'm here! Grimpen screamed. But he had no mouth to yell with. Help me!

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No one heard him, except perhaps for a few very enlightened monks. But they ignored him. They knew that Grimpen would remain on his shelf until he became enlightened, or until the end of time.

Whichever came first.

Book Eight
The Swarm

Prologue

Fresh air blew through the open windows, filling the small workshop with the beautiful scent of flowers.

The single figure in the workshop ignored the scent. He had more important things to do.

He sat down before a large, clear case. Within it, two tiny creatures frantically tried to crawl up the smooth sides. Wings fluttered on their backs, but they had nowhere to fly. They were his prisoners, but he had no intention of hurting them. He thought of himself as their caretaker.

Don't be afraid, the caretaker said to the two beetle like creatures in a language only they could understand.

Immediately, the two crawlers stopped moving. On their heads, small antennae waved back and forth.

I am here to help you, the caretaker said.

The crawlers fluttered their wings and moved sharp-looking pincers back and forth.

The caretaker opened the glass case and reached inside. The two creatures jumped onto his arm and quickly scurried up to his shoulder.

I am your friend, the caretaker said. *I'll do whatever you need me to do.*

The creatures fluttered their wings again.

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Outside the workshop, more wings fluttered in answer.
Thousands upon thousands of wings.

A dark cloud of wings fell over the little workshop, covering it
in a blanket of crawling creatures.

Inside, the caretaker laughed.

Chapter One

The hum of starship engines was music to Zak Arranda's ears.

He sat in the rear compartment of the *Shroud*, the ship in which he traveled with his sister, Tash, and his uncle Hoole. He was as close to the engines as he could be——probably closer than it was *safe* to be while they were operating. A thick layer of heat——resistant shielding separated him from the actual ion engines. Even so, the heat leaking through the durasteel walls was already making him and his clothes sticky with sweat. But Zak didn't care.

"So the hyperdrive motivator must connect to the main thrusters here," he said to himself, looking up from his small datapad and poking a finger at a thick piece of cable.

After a lot of searching through the ship's computer, Zak had finally found a diagram of the *Shroud's* engines. The diagram should have shown him everything he needed to know, but unfortunately, the *Shroud's* previous owner had made a lot of changes. And the changes were what interested Zak. To a twelve-year-old boy who loved to take things apart and put them back together again, the starship was a flying playground.

One particular wire——a thick green-and-white-striped cable——caught Zak's eye.

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"You know," said Zak to no one in particular, "I'll bet if I just connected this wire to the back-up power system, I could——"

Suddenly, the door behind him slid open. His sister stood in the doorway, her hands on her hips. "There you are," Tash Arranda said. "You know, we have a lesson with Uncle Hoole."

"Oh, yeah," Zak sighed. Hoole was a stickler for education. Even though Zak and Tash traveled constantly with their uncle and had not attended a regular school in months, they probably did more homework than any other twelve-and thirteen-year-olds in the galaxy. "When does it start?" he asked.

"Five minutes ago," Tash replied. "You're late."

"Be right there," Zak said.

Tash leaned over his shoulder and looked at the tangle of wires running through the wall to the powerful engines beyond. "Are you sure you should be messing around with that?"

"No problem," Zak said confidently. "Go on ahead. I'll be right there."

Tash gave her younger brother a doubtful look, then sighed and turned away. "Just be careful."

Zak grunted and waited until he heard the door slide shut. It wasn't that he didn't *like* Tash. He did. She was his sister and his best friend. They'd been through more together than most brothers and sisters. Their parents had died several months before when the Empire destroyed their homeworld, Alderaan. Luckily, Tash and Zak had been offworld at the time. And now they lived with their anthropologist uncle, Hoole—which meant they traveled all over the galaxy with him.

Even though Zak and Tash were brother and sister, they were very different from each other. Tash wasn't as interested in machines as Zak was. She liked to read and study. She was always using brainpower—especially since she'd become interested in the old Jedi Knights. Zak preferred anything that he could take apart and put back together with his own two hands.

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"I'm sure I can boost the ship's power if I just disconnect this wire...", he said. He plucked the wire from the wall. Nothing happened.

"...And connect it over here." He moved the thick wire to another panel in the wall, and looked for the right outlet. "There," he said, and stuck the wire into the wall.

Zzzzzzzaaaaappp!

Electric current ran up Zak's arm, through his neck, and right into his head. Lightning flashed behind his eyeballs. A loud *pop!* followed, and Zak jumped backward as though a bantha had kicked him. Sparks flew from the panel.

The electrical tingle in Zak's body lasted only a few seconds. He checked his hands. They were hot, but he wasn't burned.

He had a feeling he was lucky:

Another loud *pop!* exploded from the panel in a shower of sparks. Zak froze. What had he done to the engines? What had he done to the ship? He waited a moment, but the engines continued to hum with their usual strength.

He had a feeling he was *really* lucky.

Zak hurried out of the engine room and down the corridor. A thin trail of smoke and the smell of burning metal followed him. What had caused that pop? What had he done wrong? And, more important... Should he tell Uncle Hoole?

Probably, was Zak's first thought.

But his second thought was, *Why bother?*

After all, the engines were still running perfectly. Whatever he'd done couldn't be that bad. It might not be worth mentioning. Besides, if he told Uncle Hoole, Tash would be sure to find out, and the last thing Zak wanted to hear was "I told you so" from her.

He decided to keep the accident a secret. The next time they landed, he'd give the engines a closer look and repair whatever little problem he might have caused. As long as the mistake was fixed, he told himself, no one else needed to know.

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"Zak, you're late," Uncle Hoole said as Zak entered the *Shroud's* small lounge area. His uncle cast a glance at Zak, his long, gray Shi'ido face looking stern as usual.

"Sorry, Uncle Hoole," Zak replied. "I didn't mean to miss the beginning of the lesson."

Hoole gave a small nod. "I'm afraid you've missed something else important. I just finished telling Tash about our destination."

"Destination?" Zak asked. "Have you found a safe place for us to hide from the Empire?"

Several months ago, Tash, Zak, and Hoole had become entangled in an Imperial plot. In the end, they had helped the Rebels foil the schemes of an Imperial scientist, but unfortunately they had also attracted the attention of the Emperor's most powerful servant—Darth Vader. Now they were on the run, traveling through the most remote parts of the galaxy, trying to avoid any Imperial contact while Hoole searched for a safe place to live.

"I'm afraid I haven't located a good hiding place as yet," the Shi'ido admitted. "But in the meantime, I've received word that the Empire is planning to establish a military outpost on the planet S'krrr"

Zak had never heard of S'krrr, but that didn't surprise him. There were thousands of civilized planets in the Empire. "So?" he asked. "The Empire has outposts everywhere."

"Not on S'krrr" Tash said. "At least not yet."

"Indeed," Hoole agreed. "And the real tragedy is that if the Imperials take over this planet, they will certainly destroy one of the most beautiful places in the entire galaxy—the Sikadian Garden. This garden is the cultural landmark of the people of S'krrr" Hoole paused. "I am determined to make sure the Empire doesn't destroy any more cultures."

Zak nodded. He knew his uncle's sad story all too well. Years ago, Hoole had been a scientist working for the Empire. The Empire had allowed one of Hoole's experiments to turn bad, and the resulting accident wiped out an entire race of beings. From

that day on, Hoole had sworn he would protect as many civilizations as he could from Imperial cruelty.

A soft alarm sounded on the lounge's wall panel. "We're dropping out of hyperspace," Hoole said. "We must be near the planet now."

They hurried to the *Shroud's* cockpit just in time to see the planet come into view. S'krrr was a beautiful blue-green world, with rolling clouds covering continents and oceans.

Zak felt his heart beat nervously as Hoole guided the ship down to the planet's surface. What if his little accident had damaged the landing gear? But the ship continued to glide smoothly through the air as Hoole spoke to S'krrr's planetary landing control.

The speaker on the other end of the link seemed to be expecting Hoole. "The area near the Sikadian Garden is usually restricted," the voice said, "but you have permission to land just outside the garden walls."

Tash and Zak were impressed. "Do not be," Hoole advised. "It is simply that my reputation as an anthropologist gets me into some restricted spaces."

In minutes, the *Shroud* was zooming over the surface of the planet. On the horizon, they could see a wide, multicolored patch of ground that extended for several kilometers. Even at a distance, the Sikadian Garden looked beautiful.

The *Shroud* touched down outside a high wall covered in green vines. Even before they had come to a stop, a sweet, powerful smell filled the cabin.

"What's that?" Tash asked.

"Flowers from the garden," Hoole replied. "The scent is quite pleasant."

"And strong," she added, "if we can smell it right through the ship!"

"It probably came in through the air vents," Zak guessed. "I opened them up as we landed." Zak had opened them to help the engines cool—and to let the fresh air blow away the scent

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of burning wires. But he had decided not to tell Tash and Uncle Hoole about that.

As the ship finally settled on its landing gear, Zak let out a soft sigh of relief. Whatever he had done had obviously not hurt the ship.

"Zak, please go lower the ramp," Hoole requested.

"You bet!" Zak replied. He was so relieved he almost skipped down the corridor. At the exit hatch, he punched in the code that lowered the ramp and waited as the door slid open.

He stepped out into a bright, sunny day and smelled the scent of hundreds of growing flowers drifting toward him. He took a deep breath.

And then almost choked on it.

A giant insect, taller than Zak, came scuttling up the ramp. Its claws reached out to grab him.

Chapter Two

"Look out!" he yelled, stumbling back inside the ship and running into Hoole and Tash. "There's a giant bug out there! Close the door!"

It was too late. The creature had reached the doorway. It rubbed its two forelegs together, then jabbed one of the sharp, bladelike arms forward. Zak shrank back. "Uncle Hoole, help!"

Instead, Hoole reached out his own hand and touched the tip of the giant insect's leg.

"Welcome to S'krrr," the insect said in a soft, careful voice. "I am called Vroon."

Hoole bowed his head slightly. "I am Hoole. This is my niece, Tash. And this one," he added with a disapproving frown, "is called Zak."

"Welcome," the insect repeated.

The insect——Zak soon learned that they were called S'krrr, just like their planet was shorter than Hoole and a little taller than Zak and Tash. The S'krrr walked——scuttled——on two legs, but its movements were very quick. Instead of hands, Vroon's arms ended in two bladelike tips that seemed to bend, so that he could pick up objects. His entire body was covered by a hard shell. Zak tried hard to think of the word for it. He was sure he had heard it during a biology lesson. Exoskeleton. That was it. A

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skeleton on the outside of the body. The S'krrr's entire body was hard and green except his belly, which was a soft, pale yellow.

Vroon's head was shaped like a triangle. Two enormous black eyes stared out from it. Vroon's mouth opened sideways, instead of up and down like a human's. Because of that, Zak couldn't tell if the S'krrr was amused or angry. His insectlike face was impossible to read.

Tash laughed. "Zak, I guess that'll teach you to miss a lesson."

"Right," was all he could say. "Sorry."

"No offense was taken," said the S'krrr in his soft voice. Something fluttered on his back, and for the first time, Zak noticed that the S'krrr had wings. They were small, pale, and transparent. It was obvious they would not allow Vroon to fly. But when he fluttered them together, the wings made a sound that was even softer than his voice. Zak heard a gentle *skrrrrr* fill the air for just a moment.

Then Vroon said, "However, you will have to move your ship."

Hoole raised an eyebrow. "We received permission from the planetary landing control——"

"The planetary landing control," Vroon said, his wings fluttering again, "controls planetary landing. It has no authority over the Sikadian Gardens. I do. I am the caretaker here, and I'm afraid that your ship is too close. The garden is a most delicate habitat, and the ship's noise and machinery might upset that balance. Please move it."

Hoole agreed. Zak could tell that his uncle didn't want to anger the garden's caretaker. Hoole entered the cockpit and tried to activate the *Shroud's* repulsor lift engines.

Nothing happened.

Zak felt his stomach drop out.

"Strange," they heard Hoole mutter from the controls. Again they heard him throw the switch to activate the ship's engines, and again, nothing happened.

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Hoole stepped out of the cockpit. "These engines were working at top performance only a few moments ago. I can't imagine what the problem might be. "

Zak swallowed. Now he had to say something. "Urn... I think I know what the problem might be."

"Yes, Zak?" Hoole asked.

"I think it might be me," he admitted. "I was—I was doing some work on the engines while we were in flight."

"I see." That was all Hoole said, but the Shi'ido had a habit of making a few words mean a lot. Zak almost wished he would shout, or at least get frustrated. Hoole's calm but disappointed face made Zak feel worse than any scolding.

Quickly, Zak told about the flying sparks and the loud popping sound. Hoole's look of concern deepened with every word. "Anyway," Zak said, "the engines were working fine afterward, so I figured nothing was wrong. I thought I could just fix it when we landed, and I wouldn't have to bother you with the problem."

Hoole shook his head. "That was a mistake. The ship's computer probably compensated for the problem during flight. But once we shut the ship down, the computers shut off."

Zak led the others to the engine room and showed Hoole what he had done. After a moment's study, Hoole shook his head. "I'm afraid this will take some time to correct."

Vroon's wings fluttered apprehensively. "Are you saying you cannot move your ship? That is unacceptable."

"I apologize," Hoole replied. "I would move the ship if I could, but that is impossible until it is repaired."

Again, the useless wings flapped quickly, which obviously meant Vroon was angry. "Clumsy offworlders," he muttered. "I expect you to do your best to remove this machine as soon as possible."

With that, the S'krri turned and stalked away.

"I had better follow and make sure he does not take away our visiting privileges altogether," Hoole said. He hurried after their

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host, pausing only long enough to cast a warning glance at Zak. "Please make sure this is a lesson you *don't* miss."

"Wait!" Tash called out as Hoole walked away. "What are we supposed to do?"

"Look through the garden," their uncle suggested. "But be careful. Don't touch anything!"

Since the ship's power was out, none of the computers, games, or equipment worked. There was nothing to do but follow Hoole's suggestion.

Zak and Tash left the ship and walked toward the green wall that surrounded the garden. As they got nearer, they could see that the wall was actually a tall, thick hedge. Set into the hedge was an arched opening. The hedge wall looked very old, and Zak and Tash sensed that the S'krrr had been tending this garden for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years.

Passing under the arch, they entered the Sikadian Garden. Tash gasped. Even Zak, who was more interested in mechanical things than plants, whispered, "Prime."

The Sikadian Garden was the most beautiful place either of them had ever seen. A rock-lined path stretched out before them, winding through a grassy field and into a distant grove of trees. In various areas, thick patches of flowers of different shapes and sizes sprang up. Some were wide and flat like tabletops, others rose long and narrow, like the blade of a vibropike. They could hear the trickle of a waterfall in the distance.

The garden seemed completely natural. Tash and Zak walked for nearly a kilometer before they spotted anything artificially made. It was a small stone statue, sitting on the ground next to a small pond. It was covered with moss, and so crudely shaped that Zak thought it was just a rock. But on closer inspection, he saw that it was a carved stone statue of a bug. It looked somewhat like the S'krrr, but it walked on six legs instead of two.

"It looks old," Tash noted admiringly. "It's pretty good, too."

"Yeah," Zak said. "Someone really liked bugs, I guess. I wonder how they'd feel if they knew their art had ended up as a

mound of moss." He turned and looked across the garden. "Now what?"

"Let's check out the flowers," Tash suggested.

"I'd rather look at rocks," her brother groaned. "Actually, I want to find that waterfall. I'll meet you back here."

The sound of trickling water seemed to come from beyond a grove of huge trees. Zak jogged down the path until he reached the shade of the trees. They had trunks as wide as a bantha's body. The leaves grew so thick and the branches rose up so high that beneath the tree it was as dark as nighttime.

But what caught Zak's eye was a strange mushroom that seemed to grow among the roots of the tree. The mushroom was gray, with a cap bigger than Zak's head. Dark spots covered the gray mushroom and Zak realized what had attracted his attention.

One of the spots was moving.

Creeping closer, Zak saw that the spot was a big beetle, about as long as his finger. Two large, pale wings were folded over its back. Six double-jointed legs wiggled beneath its body as the insect scrambled across the mushroom cap. Two sharp pincers snapped open and shut as it crawled, as though it planned to eat the air. Three short, sharp antennae—almost like horns—juttred from its head. Now and then, the bug stopped to take a bite out of the mushroom with its snapping jaws.

Fascinated by the creature, Zak cautiously reached out to touch it. To his surprise, the bug crawled right onto his hand and continued walking.

"Hey, you're a nice little fellow, aren't you?" Zak said.

As he spoke, something big dropped from the trees above his head. With an ear-piercing shriek, the dark shape slammed into Zak's face.

Chapter Three

Zak didn't know what was worse, the shrieks coming from the creature's mouth, or the feel of its thick, leathery wings slapping against his face. He felt something sharp scratch his cheek and he threw his hands up to protect himself.

The flying creature swerved away, flapping furiously to gain some height. For an instant Zak got a good look at the creature. Its body was about one meter long, and it had even longer black wings. Its neck ended in a tiny head. A thin tail snaked through the air behind it.

The thing flapped up into the darkness of the tree. But a moment later it plunged down again.

Zak threw himself to the ground as the beast swooped over him again. He grunted as the diving creature struck his back, then flapped away again.

"Help!" Zak yelled, but he could barely hear himself over the creature's weird shrieking noises.

Panicking, Zak felt around for something he could use as a shield or a weapon. His fingers wrapped around something dry and hard. A stick. A second later Zak nearly dropped the stick as he felt something sticky crawling along the back of his hand. He tried to shake it off, but it held on tight. It was the beetle.

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The flying creature screeched and dove again. Desperately, Zak swung his stick around, hoping it would scare the creature away. His eyes were closed, but he felt the creature slam hard into his stick, snapping it in two. The shrieking stopped instantly. Then something fell to the ground with a thud.

Zak opened his eyes. He looked up. The creature was not there. He got to his knees and looked around, scanning the area until his eyes came to rest on a dark lump quivering on the ground.

"I don't believe it," he muttered as he tried to catch his breath. "What a lucky shot!"

But he knew it wasn't luck. The creature had swooped right into him, almost like it wanted to attack the stick, or his hand.

Zak got to his feet and stood over the creature. At first he'd thought it was some kind of bird, but now that it was still, he could see that it had no feathers. Instead, its body was covered with a layer of soft bluish hair except for its tail, which was thick and smooth like a dianoga's tentacle. Its head was long and narrow, and two rows of tiny, razor-sharp teeth stuck out from its mouth. The creature's wings were outspread, and its chest rose and fell rapidly as it panted for breath.

A second later, the panting stopped. Zak leaned closer—the creature wasn't breathing. It was dead.

"Oh, no," Zak groaned. The first thought that passed through his mind was, *Uncle Hoole is really going to be mad, at me!* Hoole had warned them not to touch anything in the garden.

But his second thought was for the motionless creature. He hadn't meant to kill it. He was only trying to scare it away. But he wasn't going to waste time mourning. The creature *had* attacked him, after all.

Zak felt something tickle his fingers, and he glanced down in time to see the beetle hop off his hand and dart into the tall grass beneath the trees. "I don't blame you," Zak said, imagining Uncle Hoole's stern expression. "Maybe I should look for a place to hide, too."

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Something stirred in the branches. Zak looked nervously up into the trees, wondering if there were more flying shriekers. Deciding that he didn't want to stick around and find out, Zak turned and hurried back the way he had come.

He found Tash just where he'd left her, admiring a patch of multicolored flowers. But Tash had been joined by a S'krrr. From the distance, Zak thought it was Vroon, but as he drew nearer he saw that this S'krrr was a few centimeters taller than the caretaker, and his hard shell was a darker shade of green. Still, this S'krrr's face looked exactly like Vroon's, and Zak wondered if all the S'krrr looked alike.

"Zak," Tash said, "this is Sh'shak."

"Greetings," said the S'krrr in an elegant voice, accompanied by the soft *skrrrr* sound as his small wings fluttered. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Hello," Zak answered as naturally as he could manage. He found it slightly uncomfortable talking to the S'krrr. Their hard-shelled faces were impossible to read. Zak could see his reflection in Sh'shak's large black eyes.

"Sh'shak is a celebrity here on S'krrr," Tash said. "He's a famous poet."

"Really? That's prime," Zak said without meaning it. He hated poetry.

Tash, however, loved reading, so it didn't surprise Zak when she asked the S'krrr, "Could you recite one of your poems?"

Sh'shak's dark eyes stared blankly at her. "I'm afraid you would not understand," he replied. "The poems are all in wingsong."

"Wingsong? What's that?" Zak asked.

In answer, Sh'shak fluttered his wings. As he listened, Zak heard the soft *skrrrrrrrr* sound change its tone and pacing. By moving his wings at differing speeds, now rubbing them together, now fluttering them apart, Sh'shak created a series of intricate tones and humming noises. Even Zak had to admit that it was beautiful.

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"That is wingsong," Sh'shak explained. "It is the traditional language of my people, a language we use to speak to each other. Of course, offworlders don't understand it and can't imitate the sounds, so we of S'krrr have learned the Basic language of the galaxy. But we still use wingsong, especially in writing poetry."

"Are you visiting the garden to look for new poem ideas?" Zak asked.

"In a sense," the S'krrr replied. "I come here to calm my mind and achieve balance. The garden is good for that. Balance is very important here."

Zak didn't understand. "Why?"

Sh'shak waved his sticklike forearm across the beautiful scene, taking in groves of trees, watery ponds, half a dozen patches of well-groomed flowers, and a sloping field of grass.

"This garden displays a delicate balance of nature," the S'krrr explained. "No modern technology is used here."

Boring, thought Zak. *I'd rather study power plants than living plants.*

Sh'shak continued. "No chemicals to make the flowers grow better, no insecticides are used to kill weeds or pests. Everything is done naturally."

"Wow," Tash said. "I remember our morn and dad once tried to grow a garden in our backyard at home. We had more weeds than vegetables!"

"And the bugs were the worst," Zak recalled. "They were everywhere!"

Sh'shak nodded. "Here in the Sikadian Garden, we encourage some insects to thrive. A certain type of beetle called a drog pollinates the flowers——"

"Pollinate?" Zak asked.

"Yes, they travel from plant to plant, spreading the pollen of one to the another. This helps the plants grow. But the insects themselves reproduce very quickly. They would soon overrun the entire garden, if they weren't kept under control."

"But you don't use pesticides?" Tash asked.

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"We don't," Sh'shak replied. "The drog beetles have a natural enemy—the shreevs. Shreevs hunt the beetles, keeping the population under control. And this is where the true beauty of the garden takes place. The balance between the shreevs and the drogs is extremely delicate. In fact, legend has it that if even one shreev is killed before its natural time, the garden's balance will be destroyed."

"Really?" Tash asked, impressed. "Is that true?"

Sh'shak tilted his triangular head. "It is an old story, but who knows?"

"What do these shreevs look like?" Zak asked.

"Why, they look just like that," Sh'shak replied.

He pointed to a nearby tree. Clinging to a high branch sat a small, dark creature.

Just like the one Zak had killed.

Chapter Four

Zak's mouth went dry. He felt something heavy settle into the pit of his stomach.

"Th-That's a shreev?" Zak stammered. "And they're not supposed to be killed?"

"Not for any reason," Sh'shak replied.

"But what if one attacked us or something?" Zak asked. The feeling of dread in his stomach was growing. "Would it be all right then?"

Sh'shak considered. "It seems unlikely. Shreevs would never attack anything as large as a S'krree or a human. They only hunt dregs. Besides, a shreev couldn't do any real damage to creatures our size. It would be wisest just to find cover or run away. The shreevs are protected by law."

Tash asked another question, but Zak didn't hear her. He was too busy listening to his pounding heart.

He had killed a shreev.

He'd broken the law.

But no one knew about it.

The thought crept into his brain like a whispered secret. No one knew. Besides, it was an accident. He had only meant to scare the shreev away, but the creature had flown right at him. It wasn't his fault.

John Whitman

"Zak, is something wrong?" Tash asked him, looking at him strangely.

Zak shrugged. "Well, yeah. A little while ago, I was——"

"Zak, Tash, there you are," Uncle Hoole said. He was hurrying down the path with Vroon at his side. Despite the difference in their heights, the S'krree moved quickly on its sharply-jointed legs. The caretaker had no trouble keeping pace with Hoole's gliding steps.

"I have excellent news," Hoole said. "Vroon has seen fit to allow the ship to remain where it is until it is fixed and we are ready to depart."

"As long as it isn't activated," Vroon said. "I don't want your energy fields harming my garden."

"Certainly not," Hoole agreed dryly. He looked at Sh'shak. "I see you two have made an acquaintance of your own."

Tash introduced them. "This is Sh'shak. Sh'shak, this is our uncle Hoole."

"Uncle?" the Slurr looked at Tash questioningly. "You are human, are you not? And you, sir, are——"

"A Shi'ido," Hoole confirmed.

"Uncle Hoole adopted us," Zak explained. "Our parents died about eight months ago——"

"Nine months now," Tash put in.

"——nine months," Zak agreed. Sadly, he realized how quickly the time had passed since it had happened. "They were on Alderaan when the Empire destroyed the planet."

Sh'shak paused a moment, then bowed his head. His wings fluttered a low, sad note. But in Basic, his voice was hard. "These are sad times," the S'krree said.

Zak thought he heard anger in Sh'shak's voice and looked at Tash. The Arrandas knew that they weren't the only people in the galaxy who'd been hurt by the Empire. Zak wondered if Sh'shak might be a Rebel sympathizer.

"Are you *the* Sh'shak?" Hoole asked. "I have heard your name mentioned several times since I began studying your planet. You are quite famous here."

Sh'shak ran his arm across the top of his hard shell head. "I am known among my people," he said modestly.

"Poetry must be *really* popular here," Zak said, raising his eyebrows.

Vroon spoke up. "Oh, it's not his poetry that's made him so famous here. He has a far more... aggressive talent."

Sh'shak's forearms twitched. "As I said, I have the honor of being known among my people. But perhaps there are more interesting things to talk about than a humble S'krree such as me. Have you seen the garden yet, Hoole?"

Zak could tell Sh'shak wanted to change the subject, but now he was interested in what Vroon had said. What did he mean by an "aggressive talent"?

But he had no time to ask as Vroon eagerly led them back down the garden path and toward a small cottage.

The cottage was very old-fashioned. There wasn't a bit of durasteel or plastic anywhere on the outside—just moss-covered stones and a slanted wood roof. Vroon explained why. "All natural materials are used to ensure that no technology interferes with the true course of nature."

Even the inside of the cottage was old-fashioned. The doors didn't automatically slide open and shut—they had to be opened and shut by hand. Wooden tables lined the walls, and on these tables lay trays of seeds, and pots filled with small, growing flowers.

"There's no glass or transparasteel on the windows," Zak noticed. "Everything is wide open."

"Of course, of course," Vroon hummed. "The shreevs would not be able to see the glass." Vroon made a quick, high-pitched fluttering sound with his wings that sounded almost like a chuckle. "The stupid creatures would fly right into them. And of course we can't have that."

John Whitman

The visitors continued touring the cottage, as Vroon showed them his various projects. One particular plant had caught Tash's attention. Next to it sat the only real piece of scientific equipment in the workshop. Several wires had been attached to the broad green leaves of the plant. The wires led to a small recording device with a digital display screen.

As she examined it, and Hoole and Sh'shak entered into a discussion of their own, Zak decided to get some information from Vroon. "Is that legend true?" Zak asked as matter-of-factly as possible. "If one shreev is killed before its time, the whole balance of nature in the garden is thrown off?"

"Very true," Vroon said. A gleam appeared in his eye as he turned to study the young human. "The Sikadian Gardens are extremely delicate. The slightest change could mean complete and utter disaster."

Zak swallowed. "I can't believe this place is that... urn" — he searched for a word—"breakable."

Vroon's wings fluttered irritably. "Oh, you can't, can you? Let me show you something."

Vroon led Zak to a table across the room. On the table, something lay covered by a large square of cloth. Vroon pulled back the cloth to reveal a glass container filled with the same large beetles——drog beetles——Zak had seen earlier. There were many of them, crawling and swarming over one another in the container. Their legs worked frantically as they tried to crawl up the sides of the glass. Every once in a while, one of the drogs would flutter its wings and leap up, only to slam against the top of the container.

Vroon leaned close to the container. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"Um, yeah, I guess," Zak agreed politely. *Beautiful* was not the word he would have chosen.

"How many do you count?" Vroon asked.

Zak paused. "Twelve. No, thirteen."

Vroon nodded. "Yesterday, there were two. Drog beetles reproduce very quickly. Fortunately, the average shreev eats thirty

beetles a day. Then they generally sleep for the rest of the day, which is also fortunate. If they ate more than thirty, they might wipe out the drog beetles. As it is, they eat just enough to control the population."

"Shreevs eat the drog beetles," Zak asked, "but what do the beetles eat?"

"Everything," Vroon replied. "They move from plant to plant, eating the nectar off the leaves and helping to spread pollen. But they're also scavengers. They'll eat fungus, and even dead animals if they get the chance. That's partly why they reproduce so quickly, because they can survive on anything. Imagine what would happen if every two drog beetles produced twelve new insects every day. We'd be overrun!"

Zak felt his heart sink. *I'd better tell them*, he decided. *Maybe there's something Vroon can—*

"Excuse me," Tash called out. "What's this?" She was standing over the wired plant.

Vroon went over to her. "That is a failed experiment. I was doing research into plant communication. I was hoping to find a way to talk with some of the flora we have here."

"Talking to *plants*?" Zak said disbelievingly.

Vroon's large eyes regarded him. "Of course. The plants don't actually *speak*, of course. But it's a known fact that plants react to different types of music. Some scientists even believe that plants can sense the difference between an angry, violent person and a calm, gentle person. This instrument" —he pointed at the digital readout— "measures the plant's chemical reactions."

"So you can, in a way, tell what it's thinking, or how it's feeling?" Tash asked.

"Exactly," Vroon replied. "But the experiment has proved imprecise. It's too difficult to measure the findings."

Tash turned to look for Hoole, who was still talking quietly with Sh'shak. "Hey, Uncle Hoole, you should see this!"

John Whitman

Meanwhile, Zak studied the small instrument attached to the wires. "Well, I think part of the problem is that this wire isn't attached. Here, try this."

He clipped the wire back into the instrument just as Hoole and Sh'shak reached the worktable. Instantly, the digital display came alive. A bright line shot across the small screen, bouncing up and down in frantic, jagged movements.

Tash looked at the plant. It was as still as any potted plant, but the sensor readout made it look like a jumble of nerves. "This plant is upset," she observed.

"Perhaps it isn't used to so many visitors," said Vroon. "I lead a rather reclusive and busy life. Which reminds me, I have much work to do. If you'll excuse me..."

It was clear that Vroon had had enough of them for one day. Uncle Hoole promised the caretaker that his research on S'krrr was for a good cause—he wanted to make sure the rest of the galaxy knew about the S'krrr culture before the Empire tried to destroy it. He also promised that his work would only last a day or two, and then they would be gone.

The rest of their afternoon was uneventful. Sh'shak agreed to see them again soon, and excused himself. Zak and Tash followed Hoole back to the *Shroud*, where they ate a cold dinner ("Thanks to Zak," Tash grumbled), and went to sleep.

For Zak, the evening and the night could not pass quickly enough. Because Vroon's comments had given him an idea.

The next morning he woke early and pulled on his flight suit. As quietly as he could, he slipped out of the *Shroud* and headed for the garden.

Thick morning mist had settled over the beautiful grounds, dampening all the bright colors of the day before. Zak didn't care. He hadn't come to look at flowers.

Following the same path he'd chosen before, he entered the grove of trees and started to look around. At first he couldn't see anything but morning mist, the trunks of trees, mushrooms, and

flowers. But slowly, his eyes adjusted, and he detected movements on leaves and petals.

Drog beetles.

Once he got used to looking for them, it became easier to spot the insects crawling from place to place. Zak picked a flowering bush that was nearly covered in the bugs. He flicked several of the insects off their perches and onto the ground.

Then he crushed them underfoot.

"Sorry," Zak said. He supposed it didn't make any difference to the drog beetles whether the shreev ate them or he stomped on them. All that mattered was that nature was kept in balance.

Zak kept on stomping until he'd crushed exactly thirty—the number of drog beetles the shreev would have eaten if Zak hadn't killed it.

When he was done, he headed back toward the *Shroud*. For one day at least, Zak had been able keep his troubles at bay. He figured he could do the same tomorrow, and the next day, as long as they stayed on the planet. After that, he didn't know what he'd do.

"I'll think of something," he muttered to himself. "I hope."

The morning mist was already lifting and the sun had started to warm the ground. To his surprise, Zak found Tash and Hoole already up and sitting on the grass outside the ship. Bowls and containers were laid out in front of them.

"There you are!" Tash called. "Since the ship's power isn't working, and it's such a nice day, we thought we'd have a picnic of leftovers."

Zak plopped himself down beside his sister and picked up a bowl. It was full of leftover Circarpian snake eggs. They were cold, but scrambled just the way he liked them, and Zak dug in.

He felt better. As long as he did the work the shreev would have done, no one would know he'd broken any local laws. He scooped up another spoonful of eggs, telling himself that everything was going to work out just fine.

John Whitman

As he put the eggs in his mouth, he felt something wriggle against his lips.

Lowering his spoon, he looked into its bowl. A drog beetle was digging its way out of his breakfast.

Chapter Five

Zak grabbed a napkin and wiped the egg off his face.

"Yuck!" Tash said, scrambling out of the beetle's way. The insect scurried into the grass and vanished. "How'd *that* get into our food?"

"We are on the edge of the garden, remember," Hoole said calmly. "We are bound to encounter some of the more uncomfortable aspects of nature. It is nothing to worry about."

Zak shuddered. He could still feel the drog beetle's legs scratching against his lips. "Easy for you to say. You didn't almost eat one!"

Suddenly, Tash looked up. "Uh-oh, it looks like that's not the only pest in the garden."

A high-pitched whine grew louder as she spoke. In the distance, an Imperial shuttle glided toward them. It passed directly over their heads, then over the garden wall, and settled to a landing inside the garden.

"Vroon's not going to like that," said Zak.

"Neither do I, if the Empire's after *us*," Tash replied.

"Remain calm, Tash," Uncle Hoole advised. "If the Empire knew we were here and wanted to arrest us, they would have sent an armored gunboat and stormtroopers, not a shuttle. This could merely be a coincidence."

John Whitman

"But what if it's not?" she asked.

Hoole gave a slight shrug. "We would not have a chance to escape anyway, since our ship is not functional."

Zak felt a twinge in his chest. It was his fault the ship was grounded. And it was his fault the shreev had died. He almost wished he were a drog beetle, so he could crawl underneath the nearest rock and hide.

That feeling only grew stronger as three men appeared. They walked out of the garden through the arch, and marched directly toward the *Sbroud*. Zak, Tash, and Hoole tensed. Even from a distance, Zak could see that all three men wore the uniforms of Imperial officers. Beside him, Uncle Hoole gave a slight shiver. A weird ripple drifted across his skin, and Zak knew that his uncle was preparing to use the Shi'ido power that had saved them so many times before—the power to shapechange into any creature in the galaxy.

The Imperials reached them moments later. Two of the officers were typical sharp-eyed, hard-nosed human Imperials. But the third, who seemed to be the leader, was very unusual. He looked human, except that his skin was pale blue, and his eyes were as red as blood.

"You there," the blue-skinned Imperial said. His speech reminded Zak of Hoole's—short, precise sentences spoken in a hard voice. But unlike Hoole, this Imperial's voice was cold. "I am Captain Thrawn, commander of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Vengeance*. I am looking for the caretaker of this garden. Where is he?"

Zak and Tash both sighed with relief, and even Uncle Hoole relaxed slightly. So this Captain Thrawn wasn't coming for them after all.

"The caretaker's name is Vroon," Uncle Hoole replied. "His workshop is half a kilometer to the west, alongside the garden wall."

Thrawn nodded. "Excellent. I must speak with him immediately."

"Why? So you can tell him he's out of a job?" Tash said. Zak was surprised at the forcefulness in her voice. He knew how much she disliked the Empire, but he couldn't believe she would be so outspoken before the captain of an Imperial Star Destroyer.

But she wasn't done. "Are you going to let Vroon know that the Empire is on its way to take over S'krrr?"

The two junior officers growled irritably. "Wolver, Tier, at ease," Thrawn ordered. The Imperial captain merely gazed at Tash with his bright red eyes. "If the Empire ever decided to take over S'krrr, no such warning would be given," he stated. "We would simply take it. But I assure you I am as much a visitor to the Sikadian Gardens as, I assume, you are. I have come to study S'krrr art—especially the garden."

"How curious, Captain," said Hoole. "I am an anthropologist, and I am here for much the same reason. I think you will find the garden a most informative means of studying the S'krrr culture."

A small, evil smile crept across Thrawn's lips. "That is what I hope."

Tash folded her arms across her chest and scowled. "I never realized Imperial captains were art lovers."

Thrawn looked mildly amused by Tash's defiant tone. "I find the information useful," he said. "The more insight I have into a culture, the more easily I can... *deal* with it."

The way Thrawn said the word *deal* made Zak's blood run cold.

Thrawn spun around and marched off without another word, his junior officers following. As soon as they were out of earshot, Tash asked, "Uncle Hoole, do you think he's telling the truth?"

Hoole shook his head. "I do not know, but I am sure he has not come to arrest us. He probably does not realize we are fugitives from the Empire."

"Thank the stars for that," Zak put in. "The last thing I want to see is the inside of an Imperial detention center."

John Whitman

"Indeed," Hoole replied. "But still, I am uneasy. Captain Thrawn is here for some reason, and I am sure it means trouble for anyone who gets in his way. We must be cautious."

Hoole insisted that they spend the day near the ship. Zak was happy to oblige—it gave him a chance to help repair the *Shroud*. But Tash was disappointed. She had wanted to visit Sh'shak in the garden. Instead she was forced to watch Zak and Hoole tinker with the starship's engines for most of the day. By the time they quit that evening, she was bored out of her mind and restless.

Hoole was inside the *Shroud*, using the small emergency generator to cook their evening meal. The sun had half set, spreading a dark orange glow across the horizon. Tash and Zak lay on their backs on the ship's entry ramp, looking up at the darkening sky. Above them, dark shapes swooped and whirled in circles, sending high-pitched calls into the cooling air. The shreevs had come out to hunt.

"It's just not fair," Tash was saying. "Uncle Hoole should have let me go see Sh'shak. How many chances am I going to get to spend a whole day with a real poet and philosopher?"

"One chance is one too many, if you ask me," Zak replied sarcastically. But his mind was elsewhere. The shreevs circling above his head reminded him that he still hadn't told anyone about his accident.

"Tash, I've got to tell you something——"

"Zak," Tash interrupted. "I want to ask you a favor."

He paused. "Sure. Name it."

She pushed a strand of blond hair behind her ear. "I want to go check out the Imperial shuttle tomorrow morning. Will you come with me?"

"What's there to see?" he asked.

"I don't know," his sister admitted. "I just think that Thrawn is up to something. It's just a *feeling*."

Zak knew all about Tash's feelings. She was in touch with the Force, the mysterious power that gave the ancient Jedi Knights

their abilities. Over the last few months, Zak had learned to listen to Tash and her feelings.

"Okay," he said.

"Great. I'll wake you early," she said. "Oh, did you want to tell me something?"

"Your meal is prepared," Hoole's voice called from inside the ship.

Zak sighed. "It can wait."

That evening passed more quickly than the one before. Zak had convinced himself that as long as he kept killing beetles, he could prevent the garden from being damaged. That comforted him enough to help him sleep well, until he felt something tickling his ear well before sunrise. He tried to brush it away, but it kept tickling him. Finally, he opened his eyes to find Tash sitting beside his bed.

"Get up," she said.

Zak blinked. His eyes were too full of sleep to read his chrono. "You've got to be kidding," he groaned.

"You promised," Tash said.

Grunting, Zak dragged himself out of bed and into his clothes. He was still rubbing sleep out of his eyes as he followed Tash out of the *Shroud* and through the garden arch. The sky was turning from black to gray.

The Imperial shuttle was not far away. They could see its bulk through the morning mist, crouched like a giant predator waiting to strike.

Zak yawned. "Great, it's an Imperial shuttle. Can I go back to bed now?"

"No," Tash replied in a lowered voice. "I have a feeling something's going to happen."

"Sure," Zak said. "If we stand here long enough, we can watch the shuttle rust. Tash, even secret Imperial plots don't get going until after breakfast——"

He didn't finish his sentence. With a quiet whirrr, a small hatch opened beneath the shuttle. Zak felt Tash pull him down

John Whitman

to the ground just as a shadowy figure slipped out of the shuttle, paused to make sure no one had seen him, then dashed off into the garden.

Even in the misty dawn light, Tash and Zak had both seen the blaster in his hand.

"I told you!" Tash whispered. "They're up to something!"

"Maybe," Zak whispered back. "But Imperials always carry blasters."

"Yeah, but they only draw them when they're going to shoot someone!" Tash started after the shadowy figure.

As loud as he dared, Zak called after her, "Even if there is something going on, what are we going to do about it?"

Tash didn't answer until Zak had caught up with her. "I don't know," she said, "but Uncle Hoole said he was determined not to let the Empire destroy any more civilizations. Considering what happened to Alderaan, we should do our part, too. Maybe if we follow this Imperial, we'll find out what's going on, and we can tell Uncle Hoole. He'll know what to do."

The plan seemed harmless enough to Zak. After spending all day yesterday stuck near the *Shroud*, he was ready to be talked into a walk in the Sikadian Garden. And if they were caught, they could claim they had been doing just that—going for an early morning walk.

It was easy to move quietly on the damp grass, so they ran at nearly full speed in the direction the shadowy figure had gone. They caught sight of him once or twice—just a glimpse, but it was enough to keep on his trail.

But the figure didn't seem to have any set route. He was moving quickly, but aimlessly, dashing in and out of trees, zigzagging among rows of flowers, and circling around a large pond.

Tash and Zak followed his trail until it ended in some bushes. They crawled through the thick, prickly plants, and when they came out the other side, the shadowy figure was gone.

"Well," Zak panted, "so much for that plan."

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"Oh, laserburn!" Tash said, kicking at the wet ground. "I hope we didn't miss our chance to spy on those Imperials."

A moment later a faint hum drifted toward them, like the soft buzz of a power generator. Following the sound, the two Arrandas found themselves climbing a small hill covered in tiny glowing flowers. The hum came from the top of the rise. Silently, they crept upward.

Now they heard soft grunts and quick footsteps. The hum sounded like the *vrooom* of a slashing vibroblade. Was there a fight going on above them?

Zak and Tash crawled on their hands and knees, staying low as they reached the crest of the hill. They gasped when they saw who was there.

Chapter Six

"Sh'shak!" Tash gasped in spite of herself.

Sh'shak froze instantly. He was alone, holding a wicked-looking staff with a blade at one end. He held the weapon over his head, poised to strike a small tree that was growing at the top of the hill. The sapling already had dozens of marks where Sh'shak's weapon had cut the bark. None of the slashes were deep enough to hurt the tree, but all of them were long and precise.

Zak and Tash found it hard to believe this was the same peaceful S'krree they had met only yesterday. He looked violent and warlike. There was a fierce fire in his black eyes.

But Sh'shak's warlike manner vanished the instant he saw them. In a smooth, practiced motion he lowered his weapon and stuck the bladed end into the ground. His arms dropped calmly to his sides and his face took on the serene look they had seen when they first met him. In one second he had changed from a warrior back into a gentle poet.

Sh'shak took a few steps away from the tree. "Tash, Zak," he said gently. His wings fluttered on his back. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"It's a surprise, anyway," Zak muttered.

"Sh'shak, what are you doing?" Tash asked, pointing at the weapon sticking out of the ground.

"Ah, this," he said. "Just practicing."

"Practice!" Zak scoffed. "Since when do poets practice with vibropikes?"

Sh'shak's wings fluttered again. "I have many interests. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do elsewhere." Quickly, the S'krrr pulled his weapon out of the ground and hurried off. He was gone in a moment.

"Well, Tash, is this what you expected to find?" Zak said. "It looks like your friend the poet doubles as a trained killer!"

Tash shook her head. "Remember the other day when Vroon said Sh'shak had a more aggressive talent? Maybe this is what he meant."

"Maybe," Zak replied, recalling the scene in the caretaker's hut yesterday. "And maybe that plant the other day went crazy because of Sh'shak. We've both met our share of weirdos in the past few months, and I'm starting to think your friend may belong on the list."

"Because he practices a little self defense?" Tash retorted.

"Self defense?" her brother replied, pointing to the tree trunk Sh'shak had scarred. "Tell that to the tree!"

By now the mist had cleared and the sun had risen high enough to light the entire garden. Tash and Zak hurried back to the *Shroud*, hoping Hoole might help them make some sense out of what they had seen.

But before they reached the ship, they met another figure strolling through the garden. Captain Thrawn stood at the edge of one of the many flower beds that dotted the landscape. In this bed, the flowers had been arranged in color patterns. Most of the flowers had white petals, but some with blue petals had been planted to form swirls in the white fields. Thrawn stood with his hands behind his back, studying the flowers as though they were the secret of the universe.

John Whitman

"Interesting," he muttered to himself as they passed by. "Most revealing. "

"What do you know?" Zak whispered to Tash. "He really is a nut for flowers."

Thrawn overheard him. Without looking at Zak, the blue-skinned Imperial replied, "You are only a child, so I will forgive your insolent behavior. This time." He paused. "What you fail to realize is that a culture reveals itself through its art. If you know how to read the art, you will find everything you need to know about the people."

Tash frowned. "And that's information you can use against them."

"When necessary," Thrawn replied. He still hadn't bothered to look at them.

"I knew the Empire was up to something here," Tash said.

Finally Thrawn turned. His red eyes burned into Tash so fiercely that at first she blushed, then her face went pale with fear. But when he spoke, Thrawn's voice was calm. "I am waiting for a message from one of my officers, and I have little time, so I will be brief. I encounter civilians like you all the time. You believe the Empire is continually plotting to do harm. Let me tell you, your view of the Empire is far too dramatic. The Empire is a government. It keeps billions of beings fed and clothed. Day after day, year after year, on thousands of worlds, people live their lives under Imperial rule without seeing a stormtrooper or hearing a TIE fighter scream overhead."

Thrawn started to walk away, and motioned for Zak and Tash to follow him. They didn't dare disobey. "I assure you, I am part of no plot against the S'krrr. I find them a most interesting race. I came here to study them because they are quite different from most humanoid species. I assume you know that the S'krrr evolved from insects?"

Tash and Zak nodded. Given the S'krrr's appearance, it was easy enough to guess.

"Based on the art I've studied," the Imperial continued, "and the way they use this garden as an expression of their culture, I'd say the S'krrr worship both beauty and violence. The garden is well-ordered, but it is also natural and wild. It shows the two sides of the S'krrr personality.

"But the most interesting thing about the S'krrr," Thrawn continued, talking more to himself than to the Arrandas, "is that for many years a cult existed in S'krrr society that *worshipped* insects. This cult believed that insects were the S'krrr's ancestors, and should be respected and revered. For a number of years, this worship became the center of their art. The S'krrr were forbidden to harm the insects, and the insects were encouraged to expand and grow."

Zak spoke up. "We found a statue of a bug the other day. It was old and worn, but you could still tell what it was."

Thrawn nodded. "This garden was originally the place where the insects were worshipped."

"But the S'krrr don't worship insects anymore," Tash observed.

"No," Thrawn agreed. "The cult was forbidden when the insects threatened to overrun the entire planet. But rumor has it that many S'krrr still follow the old beliefs."

He paused a moment. "You see, that is all the information I'm looking for here. I simply believe in knowing as much about a culture as possible. And I assure you, that I have no intention of wasting my time with any fiendish plots."

Tash started to respond, but the words caught in her throat and she gagged. Beside her, Zak felt his stomach leap into his throat as he saw what she was looking at.

Lying in the path before them was the body of an Imperial officer. They could barely make out his face, because almost every piece of exposed skin was swarming with beetles.

Chapter Seven

Zak and Tash rushed forward to help the officer. Thrawn remained behind, studying the scene with cold efficiency.

Zak and Tash both fell to their knees, trying to brush the swarming drog beetles from the Imperial's body. Some of the beetles landed in the grass and waddled away to investigate other things, but most merely opened their wings and fluttered back toward the body.

"Help us!" Zak called out to Thrawn.

"Don't bother," the Imperial captain replied. "He's dead."

Thrawn was right. The body wasn't moving. The officer's skin was already pale and cold. Zak could see wriggling bulges in his uniform where the beetles had crawled under his clothes.

Something bit Zak. "Ow!" he yelled, leaping back.

Tash looked up. "Zak, what's ——Ow!" She jumped to her feet, too, sticking her finger in her mouth. "One of those things bit me!"

"Me too," Zak said. He looked at his hand. There was a tiny red mark. "I guess they don't want us interfering with their meal." He shuddered.

Behind them, Captain Thrawn pulled a comlink from his belt and spoke to someone on the other end, probably on board the Star Destroyer orbiting overhead. "This is Captain Thrawn.

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Order the entire Sikadian Garden sealed. All ships within one thousand kilometers are to be grounded immediately, then searched. Someone has murdered Lieutenant Wolver."

Thrawn moved with lightning-fast efficiency. Tash and Zak watched as, for the next hour, Imperial investigators shuttled down from Thrawn's Star Destroyer to examine the area. A medical team examined the body where it lay. Imperial crewmen cut tree branches and uprooted bushes, using them as brushes to drive the swarming beetles away.

As they did, Vroon seemed to materialize out of nowhere. His wings hummed angrily, and he said, "I must protest! This garden is a protected area. You can't just come in here, tearing up the plants. And the beetles! You must not——"

Thrawn waved him off. "I will do whatever I must. One of my men has been murdered. The investigation is more important than your bugs."

But Vroon continued to complain until Thrawn ordered his men to take the caretaker away. At that, Vroon hurried off, complaining as he disappeared down one of the garden's many paths.

Once the drog beetles were removed from the body, the medical examiner found several large wounds.

"What caused the wounds?" Thrawn demanded.

"Difficult to say," the doctor replied. "I'm not sure if they were made before the beetles did their work, or if the insects crawled into the existing holes and made them wider. But I would say that, if anything, the wounds were made by a very large handweapon, perhaps a vibropike."

Zak and Tash looked at each other, remembering Sh'shak.

Thrawn spoke through his comlink. "Thrawn to Star Destroyer *Vengeance*. Begin monitoring all planetary transmissions. It's possible that there is an anti-Imperial group operating on S'krrr. They may have murdered Lieutenant Wolver. Keep me informed."

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Tash and Zak slipped off while Thrawn was giving orders for the body's removal, and returned to the *Shroud*.

They found Hoole waiting with a frown etched deeply into his face. The interior of the *Shroud* looked like it had been torn apart by Tusken Raiders.

"Zak, Tash, I'm relieved to see you here. Stormtroopers marched through here and searched the *Shroud*. They would not say what they were looking for."

"They were looking for a murderer!" Zak replied. "We were with Captain Thrawn. We found one of his officers. The man was dead, and there were drog beetles all over him." She shuddered.

Zak added, "And you won't believe it. Earlier, we saw——"

He stopped. Sh'shak had suddenly appeared.

"Oh," Zak ended lamely.

"Yes, Zak?" Hoole prodded.

Zak swallowed. "Nothing. It's just that Captain Thrawn thinks there are anti-Imperial agents on the planet."

Sh'shak's wings hummed. "Most interesting. If that is the case, the Imperials may declare a curfew. I must finish some errands before they do so." He bowed to Hoole. "It was a pleasure speaking with you. Good day."

Zak waited until the S'krrr was out of sight. "He's the murderer!"

Hoole blinked. "Nonsense."

"But we saw him practicing with a vibropike!" Zak insisted. "He looked like a killing machine."

"I think Zak may be right, Uncle Hoole," Tash admitted. "Sh'shak told me he was a poet, but after what I saw today..."

Hoole shook his head. "Zak, Tash, this is where an understanding of alien cultures can help you. You see, the S'krrr are——"

Hoole's sentence was cut off by the sound of pounding on the ship's hull. Hoole looked outside to find Thrawn's other

lieutenant, Tiers, waiting. "You are to come with me," he said to Hoole.

"But I have not done anything," Hoole replied.

"Captain Thrawn is questioning everyone," Lieutenant Tiers declared. He pointed at Zak and Tash. "They can remain behind."

Hoole was gone a long time. Zak and Tash could do nothing but wait impatiently, pacing the corridors of the *Shroud*, tapping their fingers against the powerless computer monitors.

"Do you think Sh'shak did it?" Zak finally asked. "Do you think he's a Rebel?"

"Maybe, to the first question," his sister replied. "But I doubt it to the second. Think about the Rebels we've met in the past. Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia, and even Wedge a few months ago. They were willing to fight for what they believed in, but none of them were cold-blooded killers."

"And neither, it seems, am I," said Uncle Hoole, suddenly stepping through the door.

"Uncle Hoole!" the Arrandas shouted together. "You're all right!"

"Indeed," Hoole replied, "although it was touch and go for a while. I make rather a suspicious character these days, it seems. Previously, I could use my credentials as an anthropologist to explain my travels. But now it hardly seems wise to mention my true name, since we're all wanted by the Empire."

Hoole explained that he'd managed to convince the Imperials that he and the two Arrandas were on a cultural field trip. Since he could prove he'd been at the *Shroud* working on the engines all morning, the rest of his story worked.

Tash tried to break in. "Uncle Hoole, there's something we should tell you about Sh'shak..."

But Hoole was already heading toward his cabin. "I'm afraid it will have to wait until morning, Tash. I am quite weary from the questions, and I must consider how we can leave this planet safely, and soon."

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As he entered his room, he added, "There will be more questions in the morning. Thrawn has sent most of his men back to his Star Destroyer, but he is determined to find the murderer. We should all get some rest to prepare ourselves for more questioning tomorrow."

Zak went to his cabin, shoved a pile of clothes, datacards, and his trusty skimboard off the bed, slipped into a sleep suit, and finally fell in a heap on the bunk. He'd gotten up early that morning, and he was tired. Their visit to S'krrr was turning into a nightmare. Now, even if they'd fixed the *Shroud's* engines, Thrawn could keep them grounded until he found the killer.

Killer! Zak's heart skipped a beat. In all the excitement, he'd forgotten about the shreev he killed. He'd forgotten to kill thirty beetles! Frantically, he tried to remember if the Imperials had killed any while they examined the body. Were the beetles just driven off, or were they crushed? And if some were crushed, how many?

Zak groaned. "You blew it again, Zak Arranda."

But then he tried to calm down. Missing one day couldn't be that bad, could it? After all, he could always try to get sixty of the beetles tomorrow.

He nodded. That would do it. He'd simply catch up tomorrow. With that comforting thought, Zak drifted off to sleep.

He woke up hours later in the dark. Something was tickling his ear. He yawned. "Tash, stop it. Go away."

Something tickled his ear again. "Tash, I don't care who you want to spy on now, I'm staying in bed." He opened his eyes.

Tash wasn't there.

Tiny legs scampered across his cheek and scurried up into his hair. Slapping at it, Zak sat up and snapped on his cabin lights.

His bed was covered with drog beetles.

Chapter Eight

A beetle jumped onto his hand and started to scramble up his sleeve. Another one landed right on the end of his nose, its wings still outstretched.

"Help!" Zak screamed. He threw off his bedcovers, sending a shower of beetles scattering around his room. Zak could hear the hard shells of the beetles clacking against the floor, and he felt their scratching claws pluck at his skin. He slapped at his arms and chest beneath his shirt.

The door to Zak's room slid open. Tash and Hoole stood in the doorway. "Beetles!" Zak shouted. "They're everywhere!" He saw a beetle scuttle across the floor and stepped on it——forgetting he wasn't wearing shoes. There was a *crack!* as its shell was crushed, and then Zak felt squishy stuff spread across the bottom of his foot.

Tash didn't know whether to laugh or scream in horror. The wriggling bugs reminded her of the horrible image of the murdered Imperial, but the sight of Zak dancing around his cabin scratching at his clothes was hilarious. "Zak, I thought we weren't supposed to kill any drog beetles!"

"Tell *them* that!" he cried, plucking the last beetle from the inside of his shirt collar. He tossed it against the wall. The beetle thudded against the wall and fell to the cabin floor. Stunned, it

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turned first one way, then the other. By the time it started to scurry away, Zak had crushed it with the end of his skimboard.

When all the beetles were dead, Zak gave one enormous, disgusted shudder and sat down.

"That was not prime," he breathed.

"How did they get in here?" Tash wondered, carefully avoiding dead beetle bodies as she stepped into the room.

"More importantly," Hoole added, "*why* did they come in here? These creatures have no reason to crawl onboard the ship." He considered. "Curious. First thing tomorrow morning, we will go see Vroon. Perhaps he can tell us something. In the meantime, as long as you are in no real danger, I suggest we all get some rest."

No real danger, Zak thought. Try telling yourself that when you've got little creepy-crawlies under your blanket.

Tash helped Zak sweep the remains of the drog beetles from his cabin and change his bed covers. But once he was back in bed again, Zak couldn't sleep.

"I should have told everyone that first day," he said out loud. "I should have told them I'd broken the law and killed a shreev. It was an accident. It's just like with the engines. I should have told them." He scratched his head furiously—it still felt like there were bugs crawling through it. "But how do I tell everyone now? I'd have to admit that I tried to cover it up!"

Zak finally fell asleep, his dreams alternating between images of the swarming beetles and the disappointed face of Uncle Hoole once he found out about the shreev. Zak didn't know which was worse.

Zak slept in late the next day. By the time he stumbled out of bed, rubbing his cheeks to wake up, Tash and Hoole were dressed and ready.

"Hurry, please," Uncle Hoole insisted. "I would like to speak with Vroon about these insects, and then depart as soon as possible."

Zak looked hopeful. "Are the engines fixed?"

"Almost," his uncle replied. "Another hour or two of work should do it."

As soon as Zak was dressed they left the *Shroud* together and headed toward Vroon's workshop.

Except for Thrawn's shuttle, the Imperials had left, but the evidence of their presence was everywhere. Deep gouges had been cut out of the thick grass, and entire flower patches had been trampled.

"This is exactly what I had feared," Hoole said, a hint of sadness creeping into his even voice. "This garden is hundreds, perhaps thousands of years old. In one day, the Empire has destroyed part of it. Imagine what would happen if the Imperials took permanent control of the planet. That is why a complete record of the Sikadian Gardens must be made and preserved."

"Uncle Hoole. I just thought of something," Tash said. "Do you think there's some connection between the Empire and these beetles? We were here for a full day without any real problems. But the minute the Empire showed up, the bugs seemed to be everywhere. Zak found one in his food right when they arrived, they were all over that dead Imperial, and then they swarmed into Zak's cabin. Maybe it's an Imperial plot."

No it isn't, Zak thought. *It's just me.*

But he still couldn't bring himself to say it out loud.

They reached Vroon's workshop. The door was ajar, so Hoole tapped on it lightly. There was no answer.

"Hello!" Hoole called out, but still no one responded.

Hoole pushed the door open, then jumped back, startled.

Zak could see just inside the workshop around the edge of Hoole's arm. He saw the workbenches and the tables. He saw the plant wired to its digital readout. And he saw Vroon sitting on the floor.

Buried beneath a swarming mound of beetles.

Chapter Nine

Vroon's body was nearly covered with a layer of drog beetles three or four deep. The beetles were crawling all over him, but very slowly. Unlike the beetles they had found on the dead Imperial, or the beetles that had swarmed on Zak's bed, these bugs did not move in frantic, scurrying motions. They waddled slowly around Vroon's body like little old men waking up from a nap.

Zak became aware of a soft sound filling the workshop. It was a low, steady hum. It was so sweet and soothing that Zak began to yawn.

"Is he——?" Tash whispered.

"No," Hoole replied softly. "Listen to that sound. It's wingsong. Vroon is using wingsong to influence the beetles.

"How can he stand having them crawl all over him like that!" Zak wondered. "It's disgusting."

They watched for a few more minutes, transfixed, as Vroon continued to soothe the beetles. Slowly, however, the wingsong started to wear off. The beetles seemed to become more agitated, moving in faster circles, hopping and leaping over one another.

Then Vroon shook his entire body. All at once, the beetles spread their wings, and the swarm lifted away from Vroon like a

cloud. He slipped out from beneath them as the drog beetles settled onto the floor.

Only then did Vroon notice his visitors. "What do you want?"

"That was astonishing," Hoole observed.

Vroon picked up a net and began to scoop up the beetles, depositing them into the glass container Zak had seen before. "I have been doing communication experiments with the drog beetles, just as I have with plants. I've found that these elegant creatures are soothed by the sound of wingsong."

"How could you stand having them crawl all over you like that?" Zak asked. "I mean, they're *disgus*..." His voice trailed off as he realized what he was saying, and who he was saying it to.

Vroon's forelegs twitched. "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

"Vroon, we have a question for you," Hoole asked, getting to the point. "Last night a swarm of these beetles crawled into our ship——"

"And all over my bed!" Zak interjected.

"You didn't harm them, did you?" Vroon nearly shrieked.

Hoole blinked. "Unfortunately, there was no other way to eliminate the problem."

The caretaker spun away, rubbing his forearms across his triangular head in a soothing motion, muttering, "No, no, no. This is terrible! Tragic!"

"I apologize for any damage we've done to the beetle population," Hoole said. "But we have seen so many beetles, I was wondering if possibly there has already been some imbalance in the system."

Zak held his breath. This was it. Vroon would discover that there weren't enough shreevs to eat all the drog beetles. They would discover that one of the shreevs had been killed. He felt his heart pound against his chest. He should have learned his lesson. He should have told Uncle Hoole right away.

Instead, Vroon replied, "There is no imbalance!"

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Zak was astonished. *Could I have been wrong about the shreev? Maybe it was only stunned. Maybe I've been worried for nothing.*

Or maybe, he considered, Vroon just hasn't noticed the imbalance yet. Maybe it takes more than a few days for the beetle population to expand.

Zak didn't know which theory was correct. What he did know was that his stomach had suddenly tied itself up in knots. Now was his chance to come clean and confess what he'd done.

But hadn't he wanted to handle this problem himself? And hadn't the problem gone away? If there was no imbalance in the garden, then why should Zak tell anyone he'd killed a shreev? He would just get into trouble over nothing.

For the first time, it occurred to Zak that he could actually get away absolutely free. He didn't have to tell anyone. Uncle Hoole and Tash would never know he'd broken a law.

Zak wasn't sure he liked the way that made him feel.

Vroon finished netting all the drog beetles and dropping them back into their container. Hoole said to him, "You are the caretaker of this garden and I assume you know your business, but are you quite certain that there hasn't been an accident? Perhaps some shreevs have taken ill. There have been several incidents——"

"The swarm in your ship is easily explained," Vroon said abruptly. Although he continued to talk to Hoole, Zak could see that the caretaker wasn't really paying attention. Vroon was staring into the glass case, never taking his eyes off the beetles in his collection. "The drog beetles are attracted to warmth, especially when they are preparing to lay their eggs. Since your ship is made of metal——a material unnatural to this area, I might add——it undoubtedly grew hot in the sun. The drog beetles were attracted by the heat and crawled inside to make nests."

"They were going to lay eggs in my bed?" Zak nearly choked. The image of drog beetle larvae squirming around in his sheets made him gag.

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"Most likely," Vroon relied. "It is nesting season for the drog beetles right now. They're probably looking for good sites, that's all. Hardly an incident worth recording."

Hoole considered. "Perhaps you're right. But these beetles did seem quite... aggressive."

Vroon nodded vigorously. His voice grew more excited with each word. "Indeed. They get that way in large groups, especially during the nesting season. In ones and twos they are docile and hardly move. But the more beetles there are, the more aggressive they become. A swarm of them might even——" he stopped. "Well, it doesn't matter what a swarm of them might do. After all, the shreevs keep the population down."

"Are you sure?" said a new voice.

It was Sh'shak. The other S'krrr had entered as Vroon was speaking. "I walked from the far end of the garden to get here. On the way I noticed a great many beetles everywhere. I thought you would want to know, Vroon."

"I have everything under control!" the caretaker snapped. "I know my job. Everything is exactly as it should be."

"Not quite," came yet another voice.

General Thrawn entered the small building holding a blaster in his hand. Lieutenant Tier followed him, toting a powerful blaster rifle.

"What's the meaning of this!" Vroon sputtered. "This is my workshop!"

"This does not concern you, Vroon," Thrawn said. He leveled his blaster at Sh'shak. "Sh'shak of the S'krrr, you are under arrest. The charge is murder. The sentence is death."

Chapter Ten

They were aboard the Imperial shuttle *Tessera*, the craft Thrawn had landed right inside the garden. Thrawn and his lieutenant had insisted that Zak, Tash, and Hoole accompany him as he marched Sh'shak back to his ship. Once they arrived, binders were placed on Sh'shak's wrists.

"Under my Imperial authority," Thrawn explained to his captive. "I could have shot you down where you stood. But I believe in following procedure whenever possible, so I've brought you here to record the evidence against you, and to allow you to make a statement if you so desire. These three," Thrawn said, waving to Zak, Tash, and Hoole, "will serve as witnesses of the evidence against you."

Thrawn nodded to his lieutenant, and Tier switched on a small recording device. Thrawn stated his name and rank, and Sh'shak's name, then asked, "Do you confess to the murder of Lieutenant Wolver yesterday?"

"No, I am innocent," Sh'shak replied calmly.

"Then how do you explain this?" Thrawn demanded. He walked over to a storage cabinet and removed the weapon Zak and Tash had seen Sh'shak use the day before. "For the record, I am holding a vibropike of the kind used on S'krree," Thrawn stated. "This pike was discovered hidden in some bushes inside

the garden. We scanned the pike for fibers and skin samples. This pike definitely belongs to you." Thrawn leaned forward. "And it could easily have been used to kill my officer."

"Uncle Hoole, what should we do?" Tash whispered.

"Nothing," her uncle replied in a barely audible voice.

Sh'shak spoke up. "I do not deny that this is my weapon. But I did not kill anyone. You say you examined the weapon. Did you find any of the lieutenant's blood on it?"

Thrawn shrugged. "You could easily have cleaned the blade of the weapon to remove such evidence. Besides," the Imperial captain added, "what would a so-called poet need with the weapon of a killer?"

"On S'krrr," Sh'shak replied, "the most respected of our artists are poet-warriors—individuals who have mastered both the good side and the dark side of their personalities. We strike a balance, just as this garden strikes a balance. I have the honor of being recognized by my people as both a poet and a warrior."

"A convenient story," Thrawn countered, "especially for someone whose false identity has just been revealed."

Hoole found his chance to speak up. "It's true. You only have to look at the culture of the S'krrr. I have spent quite a bit of time over the last few days talking with Sh'shak and studying the S'krrr beliefs. Their history is full of both beauty and violence. So it is no surprise they have become both artists and warriors. They learn to fight with traditional weapons, and they perform ritual combats. It is part of their culture."

Tash suddenly remembered her conversation with Thrawn. "Captain Thrawn, you said almost the same thing yourself when you were walking through the garden."

Thrawn considered. "Perhaps. But even if this is true, and Sh'shak has a reason for carrying a deadly weapon near Imperial personnel, it still doesn't mean he's innocent." The Imperial captain glanced at a small datapad. "My medical staff determined that Lieutenant Wolver's death occurred at approximately six o'clock in the morning. Where were you at that time?"

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Sh'shak paused. "I was in the garden."

Thrawn nodded. "And what were you doing?"

Again, Sh'shak paused. Zak wondered what Sh'shak would say next. If he told the truth, it might seal his fate. And somewhere in the back of his mind, Zak wondered what he would do in the same situation.

Finally, Sh'shak said, "I was practicing with my vibropike."

A brief, thin smile crossed Thrawn's face again. "I see. So you were in the location of the murder, with a weapon that could have caused the murder. And yet you say you're innocent."

Sh'shak nodded. "That is correct."

"It's true!" Zak blurted out. He wanted to help Sh'shak. The S'krrr had told the truth, even though it made him seem guilty. It wasn't fair to let him stand alone. "Tash and I saw him. He was practicing on a little tree."

Thrawn blinked his red eyes once. "Ah, yes. You two were also in the garden that morning," he said to Zak and Tash. "What were you doing there?"

Zak decided to speak for himself and his sister. He also decided to follow Sh'shak's example and tell the truth. "We were following someone from your shuttle," he admitted. "It was probably Lieutenant Wolver, but we couldn't see clearly through the mist."

The Imperial captain turned squarely toward Zak and Tash. Then he looked at Hoole. "Simple tourists do not follow Imperial officers. Your involvement in this affair grows deeper—"

"That seems to happen wherever we go," Zak muttered under his breath.

"——and I'm beginning to wonder just who you are," Thrawn concluded. "As soon as we have finished with this S'krrr, I'll have you three taken to my Star Destroyer for identification."

Zak and Tash swallowed. Once Thrawn looked into their past, he'd find out they were wanted by none other than Darth

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Vader. But there was nothing they could do as long as Thrawn and his aide had them covered with their blasters.

"In the meantime," Thrawn said, turning back to Sh'shak, "I have no intention of killing an Imperial citizen without a good reason. And the claims of these children are easy enough to verify." The blue-skinned officer pointed toward the shuttle's exit. "Show me where you practiced. If there's evidence that you were actually there during the murder, your life may be spared."

A few moments later they were walking single file through the garden. Zak and Tash led the way, with Hoole behind them. Sh'shak followed Hoole, and Thrawn and Lieutenant Tier brought up the rear, blasters in hand.

Now and then, Zak glanced back at Uncle Hoole. The Shi'ido's expression was stonier and more unreadable than ever. Zak knew that Hoole was preparing to make a move. There were only two Imperials—even though they were armed—and with his shape-changing powers, Hoole could probably overcome them both.

"Lieutenant Tier," Captain Thrawn said as they marched. "It occurs to me that there is a wild card in this sabacc deck, and I dislike wild cards. The caretaker, Vroon, is not under surveillance."

"That's true, Captain," Lieutenant Tier said. "But you don't suppose that gardener could have——?"

"I suppose nothing," Thrawn interrupted. "I simply want to have all points covered. Go find Vroon and bring him to me."

With a quick salute, Lieutenant Tier marched away and headed back toward the caretaker's workshop.

Now, if there were trouble, the odds were in Hoole's favor.

Zak and Tash saw the small hill up ahead. They reached it quickly. At the top stood the small sapling, still marked with the

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cuts of Sh'shak's weapon. The grass around the tree was torn and chopped up by the quick movements of the S'krrr's feet.

"There's your evidence," Tash said. "This is where we found Sh'shak yesterday morning."

Now that he was alone among civilians, Thrawn moved more cautiously. He kept a safe distance from the others, and he spared only a quick glance at the tree and the ground. But that glance told him all he needed to know. "It seems the S'krrr was here," he agreed.

Zak gave an audible sigh.

"However," the Imperial captain continued, "there is nothing to indicate how long you were here, or what time. For all I know you practiced on this tree, then slaughtered Lieutenant Wolver and left him for the beetles to eat."

"But that is not the case," Sh'shak insisted.

Thrawn shrugged. "I am making my decision based on the evidence at hand. That evidence suggests you're the killer."

He pointed his blaster at Sh'shak's chest.

"Agggghhhh!"

A strangled cry flew up the hill to meet them. It was followed a second later by Lieutenant Tier. The Imperial aide stumbled to the crest of the hill, gagging and choking on something. His blaster was gone. His eyes were wild with fear, and he clutched at his throat.

"Tier, explain yourself," Thrawn ordered. "What's wrong?"

Lieutenant Tier opened his mouth to speak, but instead of words, a swarm of drog beetles spilled from his mouth.

Chapter Eleven

Lieutenant Tier collapsed. His body twisted and turned as more drog beetles poured out of his mouth. They were also inside his clothes and crawling in his hair.

Seconds later the officer stopped moving. The beetles continued to crawl over his body. Zak was too horrified to go near another beetle-covered body, but from a distance, it looked like the insects were biting into Lieutenant Tier's skin. He remembered something Vroon had told him: The drog beetles would eat anything. No, not anything—*everything*.

Hoole and Sh'shak knelt beside the body, flicking beetles away, but it was useless. The officer was dead.

"How-how did he die?" Tash asked unsteadily. "Was it... Is it? I mean..."

"It seems quite obvious now," Thrawn said. He studied the air, looking for signs of danger. "When we found the first body, we naturally assumed that someone had murdered Lieutenant Wolver and left his body lying on the ground, where the drog beetles found it."

"But that is not the case," said Sh'shak.

"No," Hoole agreed. "It is far worse than that. The drog beetles are killing people."

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Hoole's statement hit Zak like a blaster bolt. *The beetles are killing people.* Vroon had said that the beetles became more aggressive in large numbers... and their numbers had grown because he had killed a shreev. In a way, *he* had killed the two Imperials.

"It's all my fault!" The words burst out of him. "Everything is all my fault." He felt a hot tear spring into his eye and he tried to squeeze it away.

All eyes turned to him. Hoole stood up from the body and said, "Zak, what are you talking about?"

The confession that Zak should have made days ago poured out of him. "Uncle Hoole, I really messed up. The first day we got here, I went for a walk. A shreev attacked me. It was probably only hunting a drog beetle that had landed on my hand, but I didn't know that. I thought it was after *me*, and I hit it with a stick. I killed it. Then, when I found out it was against the law to kill shreevs, I didn't tell anyone. I didn't want to get into trouble."

"I see," Hoole said.

"I thought I could fix the problem myself," Zak moaned. "Just like with the ship. I should have known better, but I figured that if I could just kill as many beetles as a shreev every day, I wouldn't upset the balance of nature. But then the Imperials showed up, and we found the body, and I didn't follow my plan. And now the beetles are everywhere. It's all my fault."

"Ridiculous," Thrawn snorted.

"What?" Zak asked. He was expecting everyone to be angry. Instead, Thrawn scoffed at him.

"Your theory is simply wrong," the Imperial stated. "This garden covers dozens of kilometers. It's probably home to thousands of shreevs and even more thousands of beetles. The idea that the loss of one shreev could cause such a drastic increase is simply ridiculous. It does not calculate."

"No, it's true!" Zak insisted.. "That's how delicate things are in this place. Sh'shak, even you said so."

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Sh'shak's wings fluttered thoughtfully. "I said that was the legend. I am not sure the truth is quite so clear cut.

"One thing *is* clear," Thrawn said as he holstered his blaster. "You are not the murderer, Sh'shak. You are free to go." He removed the binders from Sh'shak's arms.

"Now what?" Tash asked.

"I do not think we are in any immediate danger," Hoole guessed. "We have dealt with the drog beetles before. We should get back to the ship as soon as possible, but I think we should stop by Vroon's workshop first. Maybe the caretaker can explain the population increase."

"This garden is his responsibility. He has some explaining to do," Thrawn growled. "Two of my men have died here."

They walked quickly. The idea of being smothered to death by beetles made them hurry—even Thrawn moved with a quick step. They kept seeing small clouds of drog beetles take flight and buzz through the air. Each swarm they saw was bigger than the last.

"I'm surprised Vroon would have let things get so out of control," Sh'shak commented. "He has been taking care of this garden for years."

"How could he know?" Zak said miserably. Despite what Thrawn had said, he still felt guilty.

They arrived at Vroon's workshop a few moments later and burst in without knocking. Startled, Vroon looked up from his work. He was leaning over the container of beetles, and Zak had a weird feeling that, seconds before, Vroon had been whispering to them.

"What's the meaning of this?" the caretaker demanded. "You can't just barge in here. I am working."

"We have no time for pleasantries," Thrawn snapped. "Two of my men have died in your garden, and I think those beetles had something to do with it."

"Vroon," Hoole said in a more gentle voice, "as we said before, the drog beetle population is growing. We've only been

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here a few days and we've seen it. They'll soon take over the Sikadian Garden if you don't find a way to destroy them."

Vroon recoiled as if someone had struck him. He nearly shrieked, "Destroy them? Destroy them! I can't destroy them. They're my family!"

Chapter Twelve

Vroon put his body between the others and the container of beetles in his workshop. "Don't you understand?" he cried. "The drog beetles are the ancestors of the S'krrr. We evolved from them. We can't kill them. They're... they're beautiful!"

"Oh, no," Zak groaned. "Somehow I think they put the wrong person in charge of the garden."

"Vroon," Sh'shak said, "while it's true that——"

"I have no time for this," Thrawn interrupted harshly. "All life evolved from earlier life. That is basic scientific knowledge. But you don't see other species worshipping insects."

"We are different," Vroon insisted. His wings fluttered gently and he pointed to Sh'shak. "We can communicate with our ancestors through wingsong. I've done it, Sh'shak. I've learned to speak with them. There is so much they can teach us!"

Sh'shak nodded. "It is an interesting thought. Perhaps we can take your idea to our leaders. But that is no reason to let the beetles overrun the planet. Some of them must be destroyed. And you must help us do it."

"No!" Vroon cried.

"Then you are under arrest," Thrawn declared, drawing his blaster, "for the murder of two Imperial officers."

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"No!" Vroon repeated. He dove for one of the open windows. Thrawn fired, but the S'krrr was too fast. He was out the window and scurrying out of sight.

"We must follow," Sh'shak said, dashing for the door.

The others followed as quickly as possible, but none of them could move as fast as Sh'shak. Zak could see why the S'krrr had become warriors as well as poets. Sh'shak had gone in a moment from complete stillness to blinding speed.

"We can't lose sight of him!" Thrawn growled. He was starting to outpace the others, and it was obvious that the Imperial captain had kept himself in top physical condition. "He knows the garden too well. We'll never find him!"

"We have to," Sh'shak called back without slowing. "He's the only one who knows how badly the garden's been damaged. He's the only one who will know how to save it!"

Zak, Tash, Hoole, and Thrawn soon lost sight of Vroon, but they could still see Sh'shak in pursuit, and they followed his lead.

Thrawn had been right. Vroon knew every centimeter of the Sikadian Garden, and he did everything he could to lose them. He ran through thick brambles, he plunged into thick clumps of trees and bushes, and he scrambled up and down the sides of steep ravines. But Sh'shak was able to keep up with him, and as long as they kept him in sight, they thought they still had a chance.

Finally, they ran into a small forest of tall, pale-barked trees and found Sh'shak standing in the middle of the path. A slight breeze blew through the forest, making the tree leaves stir and rustle. Though he had run farther and faster than any of them, the S'krrr was hardly breathing hard.

"D-Did you lose him?" Zak panted.

"I am afraid so," Sh'shak replied. "But that is not why I stopped. I am afraid we have a much more immediate problem. I suggest we abandon our attempt to find Vroon, and try to save ourselves."

"What do you mean?" Thrawn demanded.

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Sh'shak pointed to first one tree, then another, and then another. Zak looked around. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light beneath the tree branches, he realized that the stirring and rustling he'd heard were not caused by any breeze. Every leaf on every branch of every tree was covered with beetles.

Thousands of them. Millions of them.

"This is not right," Sh'shak insisted. "This cannot be due to the loss of one shreev. At their fastest rate, the beetles could not reproduce this much in three days, even if a thousand shreevs had been killed."

"Make no sudden moves," Hoole said quietly. "We know the beetles become more aggressive in large numbers. A small swarm of them attacked and killed a full-grown human. Who knows what this many might try?"

Tash sniffed. "What's that smell? It's disgusting."

The stench drifted through a break in the trees to their right. Moving slowly and trying not to breathe through their noses, they stepped through the opening and found themselves in a small clearing. In the center of the clearing was a deep pit.

The pit was filled with the bodies of shreevs. Armies of beetles covered the pit, eating the creatures that usually ate them.

"There must be hundreds of shreevs in there," Tash whispered.

"Thousands," Sh'shak said, bowing his head. "Vroon has been at his work for some time, it seems."

Tash frowned. "Does this mean we won't be able to save the garden?"

"It's no longer the garden I'm worried about," Sh'shak said. "We must hurry."

Turning, they made their way out of the beetle-infested forest. If Zak hadn't been so frightened of the creeping insects that scurried underfoot and flew overhead, he would have been relieved. As they walked out of the forest, with the bright sun of S'krree shining down on the garden, Zak told himself that the

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shreev he had killed hadn't been the start of this whole mess. At least that was something.

But Sh'shak's next statement wiped out his relief. "If Vroon has been tampering with the natural balance in the garden for even one year, that would be enough time for every female drog beetle to lay hundreds of eggs. And each of those young beetles would in turn hatch hundreds. That means this is not a small overpopulation problem. It means the garden could be infested with millions upon millions of beetles."

As if to emphasize the gloom in Sh'shak's words, a cloud passed over the sun.

"I have had enough of this garden," Thrawn said. "I'll summon a few gunboats to come down and scan the entire area." The Imperial reached for his comlink, but it was gone. "Blast," he muttered. "It must have fallen during the chase."

The sky grew suddenly darker. Zak looked up to see if storm clouds were moving in.

But the sky was not filled with storm clouds.

It was filled with beetles!

Chapter Thirteen

The swarm of beetles spun like a tornado, and began to twist down out of the sky toward them.

"Look out!" Zak cried. But it was useless. The swarm was moving too quickly, and there was nowhere to run.

Suddenly, Hoole began to shiver, and the skin crawled across his bones. An instant later, a dark-winged shreev stood in his place.

"By the Emperor!" Thrawn cried. Then he paused and muttered, "A Shi'ido. How very interesting."

Hoole, in the shape of a shreev, launched himself into the air and darted directly at the massive swarm. Zak heard the shreev shriek as it plunged toward the cloud of hungry beetles.

It worked. Instinctively, the beetles swerved away from their natural enemy. The entire cloud veered to the right, heading away from those still on the ground.

"This is our chance. Run!" Sh'shak urged.

"Where?" Zak asked.

"My ship," Thrawn ordered. "We'll be safe there."

"We won't have much time," Tash said.

She was right. Hoole in shreev form plunged into the cloud, striking at the thick wall of beetles. But one shreev could hardly attack the entire swarm. Although the beetles gave way wherever

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the shreev flew, the rest of the cloud leaked around it and continued to pour through the sky toward the victims on the ground.

Hoole was nearly overwhelmed by advancing beetles. Letting out one more frustrated shriek, he turned and flapped away. But instead of flying toward Zak and Tash, Hoole flew off in the opposite direction.

"Where's he going?" Zak called out as he started to run.

"Tactical retreat," Thrawn suggested. "Either that or he's a coward."

"Uncle Hoole is no coward!" Tash snapped.

Thrawn shrugged. "Either way, your Shi'do friend won't be helping us now. We've got to get to the shuttle."

It was like racing the wind. Zak willed his feet to fly as fast as they could carry him as Thrawn and Sh'shak pulled ahead. Behind him, he could hear a soft *whirrr* sound grow into an angry buzz. And then the buzz became a violent drone.

The swarm was getting closer.

The sun vanished. Zak found himself running in near darkness, hoping he wouldn't trip over any stray rocks or clumps of grass.

The swarm was directly overhead.

"There's the shuttle!" Tash gasped.

Zak felt something bump against his ear. He swatted away a beetle that had landed on his shoulder. The fastest of the insects had reached them. A hail of bugs flew down on them from the sky.

Sh'shak and Thrawn had reached the shuttle and hurried up the ramp on the underside of the craft. As soon as he was inside, the Imperial turned and slapped something on the wall. The ramp began to rise.

"Hey!" Zak and Tash shouted.

Thrawn was going to lock them out!

Chapter Fourteen

The ramp lifted off the ground.

"We're not going to make it," Zak moaned.

"Yes, we are," Tash encouraged. "Jump!"

Together they leaped for the rising ramp. Zak managed to catch hold of the edge by his fingertips. Tash grabbed hold, too, but her fingers quickly started to slip.

"Help!" she shouted.

Zak let go with one hand and grabbed hold of her tunic. "Gotcha. Climb up!"

The ramp was halfway closed.

Tash scrambled over the edge and onto the ramp itself, then hauled her brother up. They collapsed, grateful to be inside as the ramp sealed itself shut.

Outside, they heard *thud! thud! thud!* as hundreds of beetles battered themselves against the hull of the shuttle.

Tash and Zak struggled to their feet and stumbled toward the cockpit, where Thrawn had just dropped into the pilot's seat.

"You tried to leave us out there!" Tash shouted at him.

"Tactical decision," Thrawn explained coldly. "Waiting for you might have allowed the swarm to get into the ship. I would have done the same thing if you were my men."

"Well, we're *not* your men!" Zak snapped.

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Thrawn spared him a brief, disdainful glare. "Be grateful. If you were, I would have ordered you to stand outside and delay the swarm until I had secured the ship."

Thrawn began to flip switches on the shuttle's control panel.

"What are you doing?" Sh'shak asked.

"Evacuating," Thrawn explained.

Zak and Tash yelled together: "You can't!"

"The Shi'ido is still out there somewhere," Sh'shak observed. "He saved our lives."

Thrawn hardly paused. "And I'm grateful. I assume he can take care of himself. If not, those are the fortunes of war. But we must retreat before——" He flipped a switch. "Blast!"

There was no power. Thrawn tried several backup units, and still he could get no power to the controls. "The comlink's dead, too," he said, checking the communications station. "I have no way of calling for help."

Thrawn pushed past them and headed back for the engine room. The others followed. Their footsteps on the shuttle's metal floor banged almost as loudly as the sound of drog beetles thumping against the ship.

Thrawn pried open the maintenance hatch, exposing the main generators, and jumped back in surprise. A dozen beetles lifted off the cables, fluttering in the air. They could see dozens more crawling in and out of the wire systems. Several of the bugs had been fried by crossed circuits, and sparks flew from their crisped bodies.

"They've shorted out everything," Zak said. "Your whole power supply is shot."

"Which makes this ship as dead as ours," Tash said.

Thrawn replaced the maintenance panel. Although Thrawn was far colder and crueler, he reminded Zak of Hoole. Even in the midst of chaos, with a swarm of hungry beetles trying to reach them and a ship that had gone dead, Thrawn remained calm and collected.

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The Imperial ordered them to retreat to the shuttle's small lounge area. "We can't move, but at least we're protected," he observed. "Eventually, when the *Vengeance* realizes we have lost contact, they'll send reinforcements down to look for me. Then we'll be able to leave. In the meantime, we should be safe."

"What about the air vents?" Zak asked.

"The vents?" Thrawn repeated.

Zak's heart slammed against his ribs. "Standard procedure. Open the air vents on landing in a breathable atmosphere."

"The vents!" Thrawn cursed.

They looked up at a tiny grill set in the wall of the lounge, just as beetles began to pour through the opening.

Chapter Fifteen

The crawling drog beetles spread out like a dark stain along the wall of the room. The only tall person in the room, Thrawn tore a cushion from a seat and shoved it against the vent. But it did no good——beetles continued to wiggle their way under and around the soft cushion.

Behind Thrawn, Zak, Tash, and Sh'shak tried to fight off the insects. Sh'shak moved with a combination of lightning speed and perfect grace, swatting beetles right out of the air.

Tash found a clipboard on a table top and used it as a shield and weapon, slapping the insects out of her way.

Zak tried to say something, but as he opened his mouth to speak, a beetle flew right into his mouth and clung to his tongue. Gagging, he spit the bug out of his mouth. He pulled his tunic up over his head to keep the insects out of his hair and eyes, but when he did, more landed on his exposed stomach and started to crawl up his body.

"Agghhh!" he cried, slapping them away. The beetles swarmed so thickly in the small room that he could simply swing his arms and strike a half dozen, stunning them to the ground. He swung his arms and stomped his feet, hoping to kill as many as possible.

"We cannot stay here!" Sh'shak cried out. "We'll be buried alive!"

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"Agreed," Thrawn grunted. "This shuttle has become a death trap."

"What about your ship?" Sh'shak asked the Arrandas as he slapped more beetles out of the air.

"Same problem," Zak replied, trying not to open his mouth too wide. "The air vents will be open. And we need to make a few more repairs."

Thrawn snatched up a second cushion and tried to stuff it against the air vent. "That leaves only Vroon's workshop."

"Bad idea!" Tash said. She shuddered as she felt a large beetle crawl across her neck. She managed to grab it before it scrambled down the back of her shirt. "There's no transparasteel in the windows."

"But the walls are made of stone," Thrawn countered. "And I think the wooden roof will hold for a while. There are workbenches and tables we can use to seal up the window openings."

Zak killed another beetle, but it was like slapping at the ocean—more beetles just filled the vacant space. "It can't be any worse than staying here!"

As a group they retreated toward the hatchway again. Outside, they could still hear thousands and thousands of beetles bump against the hull as they swirled around the shuttle.

Zak caught Sh'shak and Thrawn speaking warrior-to-warrior. "You know," Sh'shak observed, "the odds of survival are not good."

Thrawn nodded. "But I prefer to die trying. Let's go."

Since the power was out, Thrawn used a manual control switch to lower the ramp. Once it was lowered, it could not be raised again until the ship was repaired. "There's no turning back," he said. Then he plunged into the storm of insects.

Sh'shak followed, and then Zak and Tash. Taking a deep breath so he wouldn't have to open his mouth to breathe for at least a few moments, Zak charged down the ramp, expecting to run into a swirling wall of beetles.

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To his surprise, he felt nothing. The beetles had turned their attention to the shuttle, and because the ramp was built on the bottom of the craft, they were actually running *beneath* the swarm. Momentarily free of the crawling, scratching bugs, Zak ran so fast that he almost caught up with Sh'shak and Thrawn. Tash was only a half-step behind.

But the movement of four figures on the ground caught the attention of the hungry swarm. A few hundred drog beetles massed together had become aggressive enough to attack a human. Now a few *million* whirred overhead, ready to attack anything that moved. The cloud plunged like a giant buzzing spear toward the four runners.

"We're... not going... to make it," Zak panted.

"Wait!" Tash cried. "Look!"

Another dark cloud appeared. This one was ahead of them and closing in fast. For a second Zak thought he saw even more beetles, but then he realized that this cloud was different. Within the cloud he could see the flapping of hundreds of wings, and instead of droning angrily, this dark shadow shrieked as it moved across the sky.

It was flock of shreevs.

They came by the hundreds, shrieking and diving into the swarm of beetles. The two dark clouds collided, and the shreevs broke through the wall of beetles like a battering ram. The beetle swarm shivered, and suddenly came apart. Smaller clouds veered this way and that, fleeing the shreevs that tried to eat them.

One of the shreevs broke off from the main flock and streaked toward Zak and Tash. At the last possible moment, the shreev pulled out of a steep dive and landed on the ground. Then before their eyes the shreev's body quivered and expanded outward, until it had changed into the figure of Uncle Hoole.

Chapter Sixteen

Tash and Zak threw their arms around their uncle. "Are we glad to see you!" Zak cried.

Thrawn nodded admiringly. "A fine strategy. How did you think of it?"

Hoole shrugged. "It became apparent that one shreev would not halt the swarm for long, so I flew off in search of other shreevs. I hoped that by rousing them, I could get them to hunt."

Sh'shak watched the skies. Shreevs swooped and dove in all directions, feasting on the thick, helpless clouds of beetles. "They seem to be making the most of their meal."

"They are welcome to it," Hoole said. A look of mild disgust crossed his face as he wiped his mouth. "Believe me, I have eaten my fill."

Tash explained what had happened aboard the shuttle, but Zak was no longer paying attention. He stared at the sky. There were still plenty of shreevs hunting the beetles, but something Sh'shak had said bothered him. He hardly listened as Tash explained that Thrawn's ship had been damaged by the beetle infestation, and that they were making their way to Vroon's workshop.

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"But now that you have broken up the swarm," Thrawn suggested, "perhaps we should simply return to my shuttle and make repairs. Then we can fly to safety."

Zak shook his head. Something was wrong. The shreevs were slowing down. *They're making the most of their meal*, Sh'shak had said.

Zak saw several shreevs break away and fly heavily, lazily toward a grove of trees.

They're making the most of their meal...

More shreevs broke away, and suddenly Zak remembered. "We've got to hurry!" he shouted in alarm. "We don't have much time!"

Thrawn looked around for some new danger. "What do you mean?"

"The shreevs!" Zak said, pointing skyward. More of the dark flying creatures had broken off and were soaring away in search of a resting place. "Shreevs only hunt until they get their fill. Then they sleep off their full stomachs."

A deep frown sank into Hoole's long face. "And the beetles by far outnumber the shreevs. There will still be hundreds of thousands of beetles left when all the shreevs have gone to take their naps."

Tash shuddered. "Which is more than enough to come after us."

Zak looked left, then right. One way led back to Thrawn's ship, the other toward Vroon's workshop. "Which way should we go?"

"To my ship," Thrawn ordered. "Now that we have time to work, I can make repairs."

"No—to the workshop," Hoole countered. "Vroon knows more about these insects than anyone alive. Perhaps there is a weapon, or some information in the cottage, that we can use."

Thrawn was in no position to argue. None of the others were Imperials, and no one else would follow him. They turned and hurried toward the workshop.

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They were still a hundred meters from the old stone cottage when the last of the shreevs had flown away, leaving the sky still buzzing with beetles. At first, the insects continued to drift about in small clouds. But soon the clouds joined together, turning the hum of their wings into a louder buzz.

Anxiously, Zak, Tash, and the others started to run. They reached the workshop just as the sun vanished behind the swarm.

They found the workshop door ajar. "Maybe Vroon came back," Zak said. "Now that his drog beetles are attacking everything in sight, maybe we can persuade him to help us."

They pushed the door open.

Just as Zak had hoped, Vroon was inside. But all that was left of him was his hard, transparent S'krrr shell. His eyes and the rest of his body had been eaten away.

Chapter Seventeen

Beetles crawled in and out of Vroon's remains. More beetles fluttered around the workshop, and for a moment, Zak feared that the swarm had reached the building before them. Then he saw the glass container that had held Vroon's own collection. It had fallen to the floor and shattered.

"He must have come back for his collection," Zak guessed.

"So much for finding a weapon here," Thrawn scoffed. "If Vroon had anything to use against these beetles, it obviously didn't work against the swarm."

Quickly, the small group braced itself for the coming swarm of insects. While Zak and Tash busied themselves stomping on the beetles in the room, the others overturned tables and workbenches. Then, using tools in the workshop, they laid plastoid trays and tabletops—anything flat across the open windows, sealing them shut. Just as Thrawn slammed the door shut and jammed a bench behind it, the swarm struck the building.

Thuk! Thuk! Thuk!

Hard, tiny bodies smashed against the stone walls of the workshop. Alone, each beetle weighed almost nothing. But as hundreds of thousands of them slammed against the door and

windows again and again, they acted like a battering ram. The walls were already starting to shake.

Zak looked around. "There's got to be something here we can use. Vroon was an expert on these beetles."

Thrawn scowled. "Vroon was insane. He worshipped bugs. He miscalculated and now he is dead. We must be careful not to miscalculate as well. Our best chance for survival is to wait it out until my ship notices I have not checked in. They will send down enough forces to wipe out ten million insects, and we'll be rid of these pests once and for all."

Zak, Tash, and Hoole exchanged glances. That might be *Thrawn's* best chance for survival, but for them it was like jumping out of the rancor's claws and right into its mouth. Once they were on board an Imperial Star Destroyer, they might never get off again.

As the walls continued to shiver and groan under the weight of untold numbers of beetles, Zak and Tash searched the workshop for anything they had missed—a weapon or a chemical, anything Vroon might have used to keep control over the beetles.

Zak knelt down and sifted through the piles of objects they had overturned earlier. He pulled aside a large plant, and found it connected by wires to a small digital device—the device Vroon had used to measure the plant's reactions.

He stared at the device so long and hard that Tash finally asked him, "You find something we can use?"

"No," he replied. "But I think I have an idea."

He held up the plant, wires and all. "You know, we're going about this the wrong way. This is Vroon's workshop. He spent a whole year destroying shreevs so his drog beetles could survive. We're not going to find anything here that will do them any harm. He would have gotten rid of it long ago."

"Right," Tash said, dropping a vial of water she'd hoped was some more dangerous chemical. "So what do we do?"

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"We don't hurt the beetles, or scare them off," Zak said. "We try to communicate with them."

Tash shook her head and jabbed a finger at the wired plant Zak was holding. "You can't talk to all those beetles with this instrument."

"Not with this," Zak said. "With those!"

He pointed at Sh'shak. At Sh'shak's wings.

The three adults stopped their work. Sh'shak fluttered his wings gently, filling the room with a questioning *skrrrr* sound. "Pardon me?"

"We saw Vroon do it!" Zak said excitedly. "Vroon sat here with beetles all over his body. But they were calm."

None of them bit him, they didn't suffocate him. They weren't aggressive at all."

"I remind you," Thrawn insisted disdainfully, "that you are suggesting we follow the example of someone who has recently been eaten alive."

A wide, thin piece of plastoid that had been fastened across one of the windows cracked and bent inward. A hundred insects slipped into the room before Hoole pushed another piece of broken tabletop across the hole.

Just as he sealed the opening, something groaned overhead.

"The roof," Thrawn said. "The wood is sagging under the weight of the beetles."

They all looked up. The wooden beams creaked. No one spoke, but everyone imagined what would happen if the ceiling collapsed, dropping an avalanche of beetles onto their heads.

"Clearly, we cannot wait forever," Hoole said. "And I, too, saw Vroon's experiment. For a short time, he did have control over the beetles. The trouble was that it did not last. And against such a large, aggressive, swarm, I suspect it would work for an even shorter amount of time." He paused. "It is evident that the S'krrr evolved out of creatures very much like the beetles we see here. Therefore, it is possible that Vroon was actually communicating with them through wingsong."

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Reluctantly, Thrawn added, "You may be correct. When I first began studying the garden, I noticed several patterns in the arrangement of its various segments. At first I assumed that these patterns were random. But since then I've learned more. The patterns in the garden very closely match the patterns of the beetles when they're swarming."

"What do you mean?" Zak asked.

"I mean that, in a very simple way, the beetles and the S'krrr think alike," Thrawn concluded.

"You mean Vroon was right?" Tash asked. "The drog beetles really are the S'krrrs' ancestors?"

Hoole nodded in agreement. "Yes. In the same way a particular squid is the ancestor of the Calamari, and a certain tree-climber is the ancestor of the Wookiees." He turned to Sh'shak. "More importantly, it means that you may be able to communicate with them."

"I will try," Sh'shak agreed. "But I doubt I can make my wingsong heard over the droning of the swarm."

"You'll have help," Hoole said. The skin shivered over his bones, and he transformed into a S'krrr. His wings fluttered as he said in a S'krrr's soft voice, "I don't know your language, but I can copy whatever sound you make."

"What will we do once the swarm is calmed down?" Zak asked.

"Simple," Hoole replied. "While we are communicating with the beetles, you and Tash will walk quickly and quietly down the path to the *Shroud*. The ship is almost fixed. You will finish the repairs and fly the ship back here to save us."

"You want us to *what*?" Tash gasped.

"Walk out there?" Zak echoed. He looked down at the shell that had once been Vroon. He wondered if the beetles would gnaw at *his* skeleton.

"Zak, Tash," Hoole said. He looked down at them understandingly. "I cannot—I would not—make you do

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this. But you may be our only chance. If I stay here to help Sh'shak, you are the only ones who can fix the ship."

Zak looked at his sister and knew what she was thinking. After all the times Hoole had saved them, how could they refuse him now? Zak said, "I-I think I can finish the ship pretty quickly. Especially if Captain Thrawn agrees to help."

"I agree to nothing," the Imperial retorted. "The entire venture still sounds foolish to me. If you are fortunate enough to calm this swarm down, I intend to return to my own ship and fix my comlink as quickly as possible."

Hoole's S'krree wings fluttered irritably. "Very well. Let us begin."

Sh'shak seated himself in a comfortable place and took in a deep breath. Then softly, his wings began to stir. At first they could hear nothing but the familiar *skrrrr*. But slowly, over the *thuk! thuk! thuk!* of swarming beetles outside, the sound of his vibrating wings rose higher, filling the room and filtering out of the workshop to the garden beyond.

Once Sh'shak's wingsong had reached a steady pattern, Hoole joined in, imitating the S'krree perfectly. The sound of their wings was now so loud that Zak wanted to cover his ears, but so beautiful that he wanted to listen.

Outside, the drone of the swarm grew quieter.

As the song continued, Hoole signaled to Zak.

Hoping that the song had worked, Zak took a deep breath and opened the door.

And instantly vanished behind a cloud of swarming beetles.

Chapter Eighteen

Zak dared not open his mouth to call for help. If he had, he would have breathed in a lungful of insects. But just as he started to stagger away from the swarm, the cloud of beetles thinned and then vanished.

None of the beetles had bitten him, or even latched on to his clothes. They had all brushed quickly by him and settled onto every open space in the workshop. The entire room was carpeted with beetles. Swarms of them had even landed on Sh'shak and Hoole. They were so startled that they nearly stopped their wingsong, but managed to keep it up as even more insects covered them.

Not only were the beetles no longer biting, but their angry drone had changed to a soft, gentle *w/rrrrr*. They were responding to the wingsong.

But for how long?

"We'd better hurry," Zak whispered to Tash.

It was weird, Zak thought, leaving Uncle Hook buried under a pile of insects. But he tried to keep his mind on the job ahead. As carefully as they could, he and Tash stepped out of the workshop...and into a writhing sea of insects.

There were beetles everywhere. Millions of them, wriggling in circles on the ground, spreading out as far as the eye could see.

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"Ugh," Tash said. "This is not going to be fun."

Walking on tiptoes, the two Arrandas made their way down the path, or at least what they thought was the path. The path had been buried under the insects.

Wherever they could, they stepped onto rocks or patches of bare ground. But more often, they simply had to step on the carpet of beetles, sinking up to their ankles in writhing bodies as they crushed dozens underfoot. Soon their shoes were soaked in goo that Zak didn't want to think about.

They hadn't gone far when they heard Thrawn storming up behind them. He made no comment as he waded quickly through the beetlefield toward his nearby shuttle.

"You know what he's going to do if he repairs his ship first," Tash whispered.

Zak nodded. "Call down his soldiers, and run a security check on us. We've got to move it."

They reached the halfway point between the workshop and their ship. They could see the garden arch just ahead, and beyond it lay the *Shroud*. Wingsong had drifted toward them all the time, keeping the beetles in a trance. But they could see that the effect of the wingsong was starting to wear off. The beetles had difficulty keeping still, and their herky-jerky movements made them bump into each other, causing a chain reaction.

Worse still, the farther Zak and Tash got from the workshop, the fainter the wingsong became. As they reached the garden arch, they could see small clouds of beetles rising into the air, then settling back down. The insects were growing restless.

The *whrrr* of the swarm began to deepen into a threatening hum.

"We're not going to make it," Tash whispered fearfully.

"Run!" Zak urged.

The two Arrandas broke into a sprint, smashing through the beetles that still surrounded them. They sprang through the arch. There were fewer beetles outside the wall, and their footing was better.

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Tash and Zak reached the ship and climbed aboard just in time. Behind them, the beetles rose up from the ground in one giant layer, like a huge cloak being lifted over the garden. The wingsong was losing its power over them.

Inside the *Shroud*, Zak and Tash sealed the door and ran back to the engine room. "We're going to have the same problem we had on the Imperial shuttle," Zak reminded his sister. "If those bugs decide they want in, they'll come right through the vents."

Tash nodded. "I'll try to slow them down. You get to work." She shook her head worriedly. "You know Zak, you wanted to fix your mistake all by yourself. Well, here's your chance. Don't let us down!"

Zak didn't bother to reply. He had already snapped off the maintenance panel, and found himself staring at the wiring he had damaged a few days before. Uncle Hoole had been able to replace the blown circuits, repair the damaged power couplings, and get the engines ready for re-ignition. Now all Zak had to do was repair the damage he had originally caused.

"Hurry, Zak!" Tash called.

He glanced back down the corridor. Tash was standing in the hall pressing a tray against the air vent. Zak thought he saw something small crawling across the ceiling over her head.

Zak tried to concentrate. He could do this. All he had to do was concentrate.

"Zak!" Tash urged. He heard her smash her palm against the wall, killing something.

Zak replaced several wires that had shorted out, and popped a power coil out of its small casing. Using a wire brush he cleaned it off, then replaced it.

"There!" he said.

But the ship was still dead.

"Hurry!" Tash pleaded.

He had no time to look back at her. He'd forgotten something. His eyes settled on the green-and-white cable. Of course! It was the same wire he'd moved the other day—it was

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still connected to the wrong socket! Zak plucked it out... then paused.

Where did it go again?

He'd forgotten where he'd moved it *from*.

"Agggghhhh!" Tash yelled.

"Now or never," he muttered. He closed his eyes and tried to remember what the maintenance panel looked like just before he'd messed with it. Then, opening his eyes, he chose one of the open sockets and jabbed the wire into the connection.

Lights went on all over the ship.

"Got it!" he yelled.

Zak bolted down the hall. Tash was still there, struggling to keep the vent blocked with one hand as she used the other to swipe a dozen drog beetles from her face and neck. Zak paused to pluck two beetles from her hair, then ran to the cockpit and dove over the pilot's chair to reach a tiny control knob.

"Vents closed!" he called out.

They were sealed in tight.

It took only a moment to help Tash kill the rest of the beetles. Then they activated the engines. A moment later, the *Shroud* was airborne.

Thunk! thunk! thunk!

The ship hurtled through a kilometer-long wall of insects, cutting a wide path through the dark cloud. They could see nothing through the viewscreen—the bodies of living and dead beetles covered the transparasteel window.

As Tash piloted the ship, Zak used the scanner to lock onto Hoole's readings, and they guided the ship toward the workshop.

"How are we going to get them out of there?" Zak asked.

Tash grinned. "Hey, you're already the hero. Leave the piloting to me."

Smoothly, Tash guided the *Shroud* to a gentle landing—only a few inches from the workshop door. Zak ran back and opened the hatch just as two figures stumbled out of the doorway. The figures plunged through clouds of beetles toward the entrance to

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the *Shroud*. Grabbing their outstretched hands, Zak hauled them onboard.

As the ship rose into the air again, Zak was on his feet, slapping away the bugs that had clung stubbornly to Hoole and Sh'shak.

Like a warrior counting his trophies, Zak counted as he stomped the biting insects.

By the time Hoole and Sh'shak were cleaned off, he was grinning. He had killed exactly thirty.

Epilogue

Zak had just climbed out of the sonic shower onboard the *Shroud*. They'd flown a safe distance from the swarm and landed again on a bug-free part of the planet. Zak, Tash, and Uncle Hoole had each cleaned themselves at least three times, and still the feeling of something crawling across their skin would not go away.

"I used your ship's comlink to notify our leaders," Sh'shak was saying to Hoole. "A fleet of airships is on its way."

"Will they destroy the beetles?" Tash asked.

"I think not," the S'krre replied. "The beetles will be caught, and the population spread around the planet. After all, as you saw, when the balance of nature is maintained, the beetles are most beneficial to vegetation. However, from now on we'll keep a closer watch on how the garden is maintained."

Hoole nodded. "And now we must be going. Thrawn may have already gotten his ship operational. It would not be wise for us to be here when his reinforcements arrive."

Sh'shak extended his clawlike insect hand to Tash and Hoole, then paused when he reached Zak. "It was extremely fortunate that you were here to help us. A few more months, perhaps even a few more days, and there would have been too many beetles to stop. They would have overrun the planet."

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Zak blushed. "If I'd said something about that shreev earlier, you might have learned about Vroon's scheme."

"Perhaps," Sh'shak replied, "or perhaps you would simply have told Vroon and he would have convinced you there was no problem. In any case, the problem will soon be solved."

Zak nodded, thinking, *Yes, and that's the last time I try to fix something without asking for help!*

The *Shroud's* hatch closed. "Let's go," Hoole said to his niece and nephew. "I've had enough insects for one day."

None of them noticed the two small figures scuttle across the ceiling. Two insects froze as the three humanoids stomped down the corridor. When Hoole and the Arrandas were gone, the beetles wagged their antennae, sensing warmth. Then they scurried along the ceiling toward the warm engine room.

A perfect place to lay their eggs...

Book Nine
Spore

Prologue

In a dark place, it waited.

It had been waiting for hundreds of years.

It couldn't move. Not yet. But soon it would be free.

It could sense living, breathing creatures on the other side of its prison. There had not been living, breathing creatures near it for a very long time. But now they were close.

The thing in the prison could almost smell them. Taste them.

More than anything, it wanted to make contact with them. *Come to me*, it thought. *I want to join you. To join all of you. To know you.*

That was the truth. It wanted to know everyone and everything, to join every living creature.

It sensed that what it wanted was moving closer. Soon it would be free!

But suddenly the creatures moved away. They left without opening its tomb, without coming close enough for the imprisoned thing to join them.

A feeling of disappointment passed through the thing in the prison. But the feeling did not last long. The thing's home, its tomb, had been discovered. Eventually, someone would open the door. It was patient.

It could wait.

Chapter One

HELLO.

ANYBODY OUT THERE?

ANYBODY AT ALL?

Thirteen-year-old Tash Arranda leaned back and stared at the words on her computer screen. She had been using the galaxy-wide communications network called the HoloNet. Most people used it to do research. Tash used it to chat with anyone else who was as bored and lonely as she was.

But no one answered.

Turning away from her computer, Tash looked for something else to do. She kept her cabin neat and usually put things away, so there wasn't much in sight. But her eyes did find an object she hadn't put away.

It was a red ball, about the size of her own head, made of a soft, flexible material. It was a little heavier than it looked, because there were a small computer and an engine built inside.

It was called a speed globe, and it was one of the few objects Tash treasured.

Speed globe was once Tash's favorite game. In speed globe, two teams competed with each other, trying to chase down the

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fast-moving, computerized globe, which was programmed to avoid everyone. Once one team had caught it, they had to form a chain, handing the globe from one person to another, until they finally bounced it into the goal. The other team would try to stop them. Tash wasn't the greatest athlete, so she was never the best player. But playing speed globe had been fun. She liked being with her friends, and being part of a team.

Sighing, Tash looked away. She didn't play speed globe anymore. Remembering her old friends was just too painful.

Tash clicked off her computer. She didn't feel like talking to anyone, anyway. If that was all she wanted, she could step outside her cabin door. Her twelve-year-old brother, Zak, and their uncle Hoole were both with her on board their ship, the Shroud. The trouble was that Zak would jabber about the latest servo motor he had built, and Uncle Hoole would discuss the populations of planets she'd never heard of. They never wanted to talk about the things she wanted to talk about.

Besides, Tash didn't just want company. She wanted to be part of a team, like when she'd played speed globe. She wanted to be with friends her own age. She wanted to feel connected to something.

Of course, it was tough to find another thirteen-year old girl who'd lost her parents and her friends when her homeworld of Alderaan blew up, been adopted by a Shi'ido uncle who was a shape-shifter, and then learned that she was sensitive to the power the old Jedi Knights called the Force.

She scowled at her reflection in the dark computer screen.

"No moping," she said to herself. "Jedi Knights do not mope."

Of course, she wasn't even close to being a Jedi Knight. That took years of training, and there weren't any Jedi left to teach her. They'd all been killed by the Empire. Just the way her parents and friends had been killed.

There was one person she thought might understand her feelings—a Rebel named Luke Skywalker. She'd met him

twice, and she'd had the feeling that he understood the Force, too. But she had no way to contact him. Knowing that Luke was out there somewhere, but unreachable, made the cloud over Tash's head grow darker.

"Aren't you cheerful today," she told her reflection sarcastically. "You need something to shake you out of this gloomy mood."

Suddenly, a voice roared behind her: "Watch out for the hammerhead!"

She jumped up and spun around, just as something slammed at full speed right into her stomach. She cried out in surprise and hit the deck in a pile of arms and legs.

When she sat up, rubbing her stomach, she found Zak beside her, rubbing his head. "You okay?" he asked.

"I think so," Tash replied. "You?"

"I'm prime," Zak said, grinning. "Your stomach isn't nearly as hard as the wall I ran into on the way here."

"What in space are you doing?" she asked as they got to their feet.

Zak shrugged. "Uncle Hoole said we had to stop for supplies, and the closest planet is Ithor. He mentioned that the Ithorians are also called Hammerheads..."

"...so you decided to ram everything on the ship," Tash concluded. "Sometimes I can't believe you and I are related."

Zak pretended to be offended. "It beats boredom."

And loneliness, Tash thought. "I take it back. We're related after all." She added, "Besides, Ithorians are about the last species that would go around ramming people in the stomach."

Zak blinked. "Then why do they call them Hammerheads?"

"You will see momentarily," said the stony voice of Hoole.

The tall Shi'ido seemed to materialize out of nowhere. Their uncle moved so quietly that he often surprised them. In his long robes, he seemed to float across the floor.

Hoole probably could float across the floor if he wanted to, Tash thought.

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"Are we going planetside?" Zak asked.

"We have already landed," Hoole responded. "I believe you were too busy harassing your sister to notice our descent."

Tash and Zak nearly bolted for the hatch that led outside. They lived aboard the Shroud, and any chance to get off the ship was welcome. But Tash's common sense caught up with her at the door, and she turned back to her uncle. "Is it safe?"

"You mean, is there a chance the Imperials might be here to arrest us?" Hoole replied. "It is unlikely. The Ithorians obey Imperial rules like everyone else, but they are not loyal to the Emperor. We should be safe here as long as we do not attract too much attention."

"Gotcha," Zak said as the hatch opened. "We'll just blend right in."

"You think so, huh?" Tash grinned.

"Sure!" Zak stepped out of the ship and his jaw dropped. "Um...or not."

An Ithorian waited to greet them. Tash was almost as startled as Zak. She'd seen pictures of Ithorians, but this one's unusual appearance still surprised her.

The Ithorian was just under two meters tall and had two arms and two legs, but that was about as far as the resemblance to humans went. Its bare feet were splayed out and its legs looked like thin tree trunks. And on each hand the Ithorian had three long, delicate fingers and one thumb.

But it was the Ithorian's head that was the most different. Jutting from its thick shoulders was a long, curved neck. Its head was a wide, flat bar and did, indeed, look just like a hammer.

The Ithorian had one eye on each side of its head. Those eyes blinked slowly at Tash and Zak. "Wwellccoomme."

Now Tash's jaw dropped. The Ithorian had two mouths, one on each side of its head. Both mouths spoke at once, giving the creature an unbelievably deep, powerful voice. The sound was unusual, but after a moment, Tash's ears adjusted to it.

"Welcome to the *Tafanda Bay*," the Ithorian said.

"Many thanks," Hoole replied, stepping forward. "I am Hoole. This is Tash and Zak Arranda."

The Ithorian nodded solemnly. "I am Fandomar." The Ithorian said the name so delicately that Tash guessed it was female despite the low-pitched voice. "What brings you to Ithor?"

Hoole gave few details about himself or the Arrandas. He was a private person by nature, but since they had been wanted by the Empire he'd become hypercautious. To Fandomar he said only that he was an anthropologist traveling with two young students.

"We need supplies," Hoole added. "May we find them here?"

Fandomar nodded. "The herd ship should have everything you need."

Herd ship? Tash wondered. *A ship for a herd of what?*

But as she stepped away from the Shroud, Tash realized what Fandomar meant. She thought they'd landed on a planet. Instead, they had landed inside a gigantic floating city.

Their ship was in a small docking bay covered by a transparent dome. The dome reminded her of the Hologram Fun World, but the Fun World's dome was much smaller. The space dock had been built on a higher level, and Tash could look down and see the rest of the floating city spread out below. Dozens of other domes sprouted around them, connected by bridges and walkways. All the domes rested on a giant floating platform that was dozens of kilometers long.

Rushing to the edge of the dome, Tash looked down. Half a kilometer below the city was a forest-covered planet. She could see waterfalls, lakes, and tree-covered mountains.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Why does everyone live up here? If I were Ithorian, I'd live right in the middle of those forests."

Fandomar replied, "No Ithorian would ever set foot on the surface."

"Really?" Tash asked skeptically, for just then she thought she saw three or four figures scurry out of sight on the ground below the hovering city. "Then who was that?"

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Fandomar peered down. A deep, musical noise sounded from her twin mouths. Then she said, "All Ithorians love the forests. That is why we live in these floating cities, which we call herd ships. Living up here, we can make sure that no harm is done to the planet. But for some Ithorians, the connection to the planet is too strong. The Mother Forest calls to them and they go back. They live very simple lives, the way our ancestors did. They have no technology, no machines, and no contact with the herd ships. Officially, what they do is against the law, but we all understand how hard it is to resist the call of the Mother Forest, so they are not punished."

Fandomar showed Hoole and the Arrandas to their quarters on the herd ship. The Ithorians were generous beings who gave free lodging to any visitors who needed to stay overnight.

Zak and Tash stepped into their room. It was small and cozy, with two cots, two chairs, and a table. Almost every other surface in the room was covered in plants. Plants growing in troughs. Plants growing in buckets. Plants sprouting from containers near windows.

Next to each plant was a small computer display. When touched, the screen described the plant, and a computer voice gave information about Ithor.

Tash studied one display, but Zak ignored the computer and bent down to examine a curious-looking plant on the table. It had broad leaves that were green at the edges but bright orange and yellow in the center, as if they were on fire.

As Zak reached out to touch one of the leaves, the plant suddenly flicked forward and jabbed his hand.

"Ow!" Zak yelped. "That thing just stung me!" He shoved his finger into his mouth.

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"Please do not tease the alleth plant." The computer voice explained, "While this sproutling poses no real danger, a full-grown alleth will eat small rodents."

"Now they tell me," Zak grumbled. "I didn't know plants came with instructions." He looked at his sister. "Hey, what's with the speed globe?"

Tash had brought the red globe with her when they left the ship and had been tossing it from hand to hand ever since. She was still feeling a little lonely, and holding the globe reminded her of better times.

"I don't know," she said. "You want to play?"

Zak laughed. "With you? You're terrible!"

Tash bristled. She wasn't really mad at Zak, but she was in a bad enough mood to make him eat his words. "In that case, you shouldn't have anything to worry about, Zak. Unless you're afraid I'll win."

Zak laughed. "You're on. But is there anyplace to play here?"

Tash shook her head. "*Not here*. Down there."

She pointed out the window, toward the edge of the transparent dome, and down to the planet's surface.

The generosity of the Ithorians continued to surprise them. Not only had the Hammerheads supplied Hoole, Zak, and Tash with rooms to sleep in, but they had also given them access to small ships called skimmers for traveling around the giant *Tafanda Bay*.

Zak and Tash stood next to one of the small flying ships, but before they could climb in, Zak stopped.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," he said. "Fandomar said the planet's surface was off limits."

"Don't be such a worry wampa!" Tash replied, tossing the speed globe from one hand to the other.

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Zak shook his head. "Since when does my sister break the rules?"

Tash thought a moment. "Well, I'm not breaking the rules exactly. Fandomar said the law wasn't really enforced. Besides, the Ithorians just want to make sure no one harms their planet. We'll be careful."

"I don't know...", Zak said.

"Come on, Zak," she pleaded. "It's the perfect time. Uncle Hoole's off resupplying the Shroud. He won't be back for a couple of hours."

Zak shook his head. "Okay, but not because I want to see trees. I just want to find out what happens when *you're* the one getting us into trouble."

They climbed into the skimmer and lifted off.

For a while, they cruised around the domes of the *Tafanda Bay*. It looked like any normal city—except that it floated and was nearly covered in the plants that grew in and around the buildings.

Reaching the edge of their dome, Zak and Tash flew through a wide opening and out into the open air. Other ships slipped out before and after them, and most of those ships flew directly toward another dome. As soon as the other ships had passed them, Tash swerved aside and headed for the edge of the floating city. Reaching the edge of the platform, she jerked hard on the skimmer's control stick, sending the ship into a steep dive toward the planet's surface. In moments, they had dropped below the level of the city. As they rushed toward the ground, tall trees seemed to reach up to greet them.

Tash settled the skimmer at the foot of a small hill. A gentle nudge of the engines pushed the skimmer under a large, overhanging rock. Hidden in the shadows, the skimmer wouldn't be spotted by anyone flying overhead. The spot was also far enough from any trees to avoid harming them with the skimmer's exhaust, which made Tash happy. Although she wasn't

supposed to be in the forest, she was determined to follow the Ithorians' customs as much as possible.

Popping the hatch, she hopped out of the skimmer with her brother right behind her. She breathed deeply. "Smell that? The air here's so fresh and clean..."

She trailed off. The deep breaths she was taking had focused her mind just like the few times she'd used the Force. Tash suddenly felt something tug at her. Not at her clothes or her hands—at her heart. It was as though there were a string attached to her chest that pulled her toward the forest.

"You okay?" Zak asked.

"Yes," she answered. "Let's play."

Speed globe was a team sport, but Zak and Tash did their best. They found an open meadow covered in short green grass, and Tash flicked a switch on the globe. It hummed to life, trembling in her hands. She flicked another switch and the globe shot out of her hands, bouncing to a stop a few meters away.

"Go!" Zak shouted, and dove for the ball. He was fast, but the ball was faster. Just before he could grab it, the speed globe jumped out of the way, powered by its internal engine.

"Nice try," Tash yelled, jumping past her brother. "It's mine!"

But the speed globe dodged away from her, too.

Laughing, Tash and Zak raced across the meadow after the globe. Catching it was nearly impossible—they needed teammates to help corner the globe and grab hold of it. They might never have touched the globe again if it hadn't bounced against a tall tree, coming to a stop in its thick roots.

Tash started forward.

"Hold on," her brother said, tromping up behind her. "What if it's dangerous?"

Tash looked around. Nothing was moving except some of the vines on the tree, stirred by the wind. "What if *what's* dangerous?"

Zak held up his finger. "The tree. Remember that alleth plant that stung me? What if its parents live here?"

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"They won't bother you," Tash said, grinning. "Unless you consider yourself a small rodent." She looked around. "It's so peaceful, I'm sure there's nothing dangerous here."

The sentence had barely left her mouth when a bunch of vines wrapped themselves around Zak and pulled him into the air.

Chapter Two

It happened so fast, Tash thought she was seeing things.

One moment, Zak was standing next to her.

The next, he was up in the branches of a nearby tree. For the first few seconds, Tash's brain couldn't figure out how it had happened—she thought her brother had somehow jumped up into the tree, and all she could do was wonder why he was thrashing around up there.

Then Zak managed a strangled cry of "Help!" and she knew he was in trouble.

The vines of the tree were moving. Sharp, jagged leaves protruded from the vines like claws. Several of the vines had already, wrapped themselves around Zak's waist, and more were now encircling his neck and throat. When he tried to pry the vines away, tree branches whipped against his arms. "Hel——!" Zak started to yell again before a vine covered his mouth.

"Zak!" Tash shouted. She ran toward the tree.

Which was just what the tree wanted. The moment she stepped within range, a vine stabbed out to loop around her ankle. But the Force was with her. She moved as the vine moved and jumped back just in time.

The tree pulled Zak in even farther, and he nearly disappeared beneath the vines. But Tash could still see his feet kicking, and

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the thrashing vines told her that her brother was putting up a good fight.

Again and again Tash tried to rush forward, but each time the tree was waiting for her. Tash picked up a rock and threw it at the tree. The stone bounced off the tree's hard trunk——nothing happened. But she had no other weapon to use. In frustration, she picked up a larger rock.

"That won't help," said a deep, calm voice. Tash nearly dropped the rock on her foot.

Standing behind her, gazing with kind, friendly eyes, was Fandomar the Ithorian.

"Help!" Tash insisted. "It'll kill him"

Without answering, Fandomar stepped past Tash and walked right into the shade of the thrashing tree. Over the hissing sound of scraping leaves, Tash heard Fandomar talk to the tree in a soft, throaty whisper. Tash couldn't understand the words, but the voice was so soothing that she felt instantly calm.

Fandomar's voice had the same effect on the tree. Its moving limbs became still. A thick bunch of vines suddenly unrolled toward the ground, revealing Zak, who had been wrapped up as tightly as a mummy from Necropolis. His face was a deep shade of red and his eyes looked as if they'd almost been squeezed out of his head.

Still frightened of the tree, Tash kept an eye on its branches as she ran to her brother's side. She caught him just as his knees gave out.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

Zak shook his head. "I'm okay." Then, with a gasp, he added, "Breathing—— it's a very good thing."

"He should recover shortly," Fandomar said.

Tash moved quickly out of the shade of the predatory tree. "Your planet looks so peaceful," she said to the Ithorian. "I can't believe you have such dangerous trees. You should cut them down."

Fandomar stiffened, and Tash realized she had offended the Ithorian, who said, "We obey the Law of Life. We do not harm living things."

"But that tree almost killed Zak," Tash said, a little more gently.

Patiently, Fandomar opened her delicate fingers in a gesture like a human shrug. "The vesuvague is not dangerous. At least not to Ithorians."

"Vesu——?" Tash tried to repeat.

"Veh-soo-vog," Fandomar repeated slowly, pronouncing the word for her.

Zak coughed. When he felt that he could talk normally, he said, "Thanks, Fandomar. If you hadn't come by, I would have been plant food."

"What did you say to the tree?" Tash asked Fandomar.

The Ithorian replied, "It's not what I said, but how I said it. Ithorians——especially the High Priests——are very connected to the Mother Forest. They know how to speak to the trees."

"Then you're a High Priest?" Tash asked.

Fandomar waved her fingers again. *It is a shrug*, Tash thought. *It's what she does when she doesn't want to say anything.*

Fandomar walked them back to their skimmer. To Tash's surprise, she had landed her own little ship under the same overhang. Had Fandomar seen them land? Or was she just trying to hide her ship, too?

"I know we're not supposed to be down here," Tash quickly told Fandomar. "I'm sorry. We——I mean, *I*——just wanted to see the forest. We didn't realize——"

"I understand," Fandomar interrupted. "No harm has been done."

Tash thanked the stars that Ithorians were so understanding. She'd met plenty of species who would have screamed at them for disobeying local customs. She decided to push her luck.

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"Urn, there's one more thing. Do you think—I mean, would you mind not telling our uncle about this? As long as no harm was done."

The Ithorian nodded. "I agree. As long as you promise not to tell anyone that you saw me down here."

So Fandomar *had* wanted to hide her ship. "You aren't a High Priest, are you?" Tash guessed. "You're not supposed to be down here, either."

Fandomar nodded. "That is correct. I think it's in both our interests to keep this secret to ourselves."

"Secrets," Zak groaned. On a recent visit to the planet S'krrr, he'd kept a secret that nearly cost them all their lives. "I swore I'd never keep a secret like this again."

"To seal our agreement," Fandomar said, "let me show you something few offworlders have ever seen."

They were standing at the edge of an enormous grove of trees with shining black bark. They weren't vesuvague trees. This was like a forest within the forest—a wood so thick and deep that Tash could hardly see beyond the first few branches.

"This is the oldest grove of Bafforr trees on Ithor," Fandomar explained. "Bafforr trees are sentient."

"Sentient?" Zak repeated.

"That means they can think. They're intelligent," Tash explained.

Fandomar nodded. "The more trees there are, the more intelligent the forest becomes. It's as though one mind connects them all so that they can all work together."

"Work together," Tash repeated. "Like a team. That's what I want." More loudly, she asked, "Can we *talk* to them?"

Fandomar shook her head. "High Priests can. They are very sensitive to the Bafforrs' thoughts. But without that sensitivity, you cannot hear them."

Tash said, "It sounds like you're talking about the Force."

Fandomar's two mouths turned down. "No. The High Priests aren't Jedi Knights. Their sensitivity is different."

Tash wondered if she could reach the trees anyway. She'd only learned a little bit about the Force, but according to what she had read, the Force connected all living things. If that was true, why couldn't it connect her to the Bafforr trees?

Focusing her thoughts, she reached out with the Force. She took a deep breath to clear her head and then felt it——like an invisible hand stretching toward the forest. For just a brief instant, she felt something reach back in response. An excited tingle ran through her arms. The Bafforr trees were aware of her!

For that moment, she felt a powerful connection with the trees. She couldn't have described it if she tried. It was like... It was like playing speed globe with a really good team, with everyone working together. Only it was a thousand times more satisfying than just playing a game.

Excited, Tash pushed harder. She wanted to be a Jedi Knight. She needed to be one, but she had no way of testing herself. If she could communicate with the Bafforr trees, that might mean the Force was still with her, that her power was growing.

But she tried too hard. The more she thought about trying to use the Force, the harder it became to use it, until finally, it just slipped away.

"What's wrong, Tash?" Zak asked.

She sighed. Zak wouldn't understand. "Nothing. Come on, let's go."

She turned away from the forest, feeling lonelier than ever.

Fandomar followed them back up to the *Tafanda Bay* and walked them to their quarters. Uncle Hoole had returned from his errands.

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He studied his niece and nephew for a moment, as though he were bracing himself for bad news. When none came, his gray face twisted into a look of amusement. "This is a pleasure," he said. "I have left you alone for several hours, and nothing eventful has happened. No Imperial invasions. No dangerous criminals."

"We haven't uncovered one evil plot," Tash agreed, casually tossing her speed globe from hand to hand. "Did you get everything we need?"

Hoole frowned. "Unfortunately not. The Ithorians do not do much mining. I need a supply of the mineral ethromite."

"What's ethromite?" Tash asked.

Zak answered, "It's one of the minerals used to create the fusion reactions that power starship engines."

"And it seems to be in scarce supply here," Hoole added.

Fandomar raised one long finger to get their attention. "I believe I can help."

Not only did Fandomar know where they could acquire more ethromite, but she also offered to take Hoole and the two Arrandas there. Not far from the planet Ithor was a large asteroid field where a group of humans had set up a mining colony. Fandomar's job aboard the *Tafanda Bay* was to pilot a shuttle that ferried supplies to and from the mining colony. Although she was not scheduled to return to the colony for several days, she would be happy to take Hoole and the Arrandas out on a special mission.

A short time later, they climbed aboard an old but well-kept cargo ship and streaked out of the planet's atmosphere. Through the viewport Tash watched the stars rush toward the ship.

A short journey took them into a wide band of rocks whirling through space——asteroids. Some of the asteroids were as small as Tash's head; others seemed as big as moons. Some drifted by slowly while others flashed by as fast as comets. Tash had still been holding the speed globe, but now she dropped it and gripped the edge of her seat until her knuckles turned white. One

wrong turn in an asteroid field would convert them into an exploding fireball.

"This is dangerous work," Hoole stated.

Fandomar nodded, concentrating on the deadly rocks spinning past the ship. Tash closed her eyes.

"It seems like you get stuck with all the jobs no one else wants," Zak noted. "Greeting people at the space dock, piloting shuttles. Don't you want to be doing something more important?"

Hoole winced at Zak's impoliteness, but Fandomar only nodded. "I am... doing penance."

"Penance?" Tash asked, opening one eye. "You mean you're being punished?"

"In a sense," the Ithorian explained. "Only... I have chosen these tasks. I have volunteered to make this run."

"Why?" Hoole asked. "I thought Ithorians preferred not to travel too far from the Mother Forest and their herd ships."

"True," Fandomar replied. "But my husband was exiled from Ithor several years ago. Although he would not let me go with him, I swore to myself that I would not sit comfortably aboard the *Tafanda Bay* until his return."

"What did he do?" Zak asked.

Fandomar opened her twin mouths to reply. But instead, she suddenly jerked the controls hard to one side, throwing the ship into a confused spin.

For a moment Tash thought the Ithorian had gone crazy.

Until she saw the sharp teeth of the giant worm that was lunging to swallow their ship!

Chapter Three

"Space slug!" Hoole warned.

Tash's eyes went wide with fear. She had never seen a space slug before. The slug had sprung from a cave in a nearby asteroid. The hole in the flying rock was large enough to let a starship through, and the slug filled every meter. Tash caught a glimpse of the thick, gray body slithering out of its cave, and its huge eyeless head. But then the slug's body, the asteroids, even the stars around them, vanished as the space slug opened its huge jaws to swallow them.

Fandomar jerked on the controls again and the cargo ship lurched in the other direction. Tash's crashwebbing snapped and she went flying, slamming her shoulder against the side of the ship.

Fandomar's move saved their lives. Instead of chomping on them, the space slug only tapped their ship with the side of its massive head. Their shields held, but the ship spun wildly out of control.

"We've got to get out of here," Hoole grunted. "Out of its range."

"No good," Fandomar replied. "The engines aren't responding."

Tash pointed to the asteroids rocketing through space around them. "We're drifting! One of those asteroids will hit us!"

"Not if the space slug gets us first!" Zak yelled.

They were still in the huge slug's range. Its head and part of its body twisted wildly from the cave, trying to reach them. The slug turned its head toward them and opened its mouth again to strike.

"Move the ship!" Tash yelled.

"I cannot!" Fandomar shouted back.

The space slug stabbed at them again.

But before it could reach them, the slug recoiled in pain as a streak of light punctured its skin.

Laser beams!

Someone was firing blaster bolts at the space slug.

The slug hesitated. It seemed to be attracted by the rapid movements and flashing lights of three tiny yellow ships that crisscrossed and zigzagged around it. The ships were hardly bigger than a human being and they moved with incredible speed, flying circles around the giant slug. Laser beams flashed from the ships and penetrated the slug's skin like needles. As the three ships continued to pour fire onto the slug, the creature shut its mouth and coiled back into its hole.

"Cargo ship, this is *Starfly One*," said a welcoming voice over Fandomar's comm. "Looks like you could use a little help."

The three small craft formed a triangle around Fandomar's damaged cargo cruiser and locked onto it with tractor beams. One Starfly pulled them and the others pushed the cargo ship forward with their beams. Once they had the larger ship under control, they headed back toward the asteroid field.

"We're not going back there, are we?" Tash gasped as a huge asteroid flew by.

"Have no fear," Fandomar explained calmly. "The Starflies are specifically designed for flight through the asteroids. They're small and maneuverable enough to get around the rocks. Their tractor beams can push as well as pull. The miners use them to

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move space rocks out of their paths, but they'll work just as well at moving us. These miners know how to handle asteroids."

She was right. The pilots seemed to have a sixth sense for where the space rocks would move. Even hauling the damaged cargo ship, they slipped easily through the gaps in the swarm of asteroids.

In a few moments, the Starflies dropped toward an asteroid that was almost the size of a planet. Tash saw a small collection of buildings clinging to its rocky surface. The Starflies hauled their passengers into a docking bay. Tash, Zak, and Hoole waited until the docking-bay door had closed and oxygen had flooded into the chamber.

They hopped out of their ship and hurried to the nearest Starfly.

"Look how small these ships are!" Zak said appreciatively. "They're hardly bigger than a landspeeder. I can't believe they have enough room for life-support systems."

"They do not," Fandomar answered. "The pilots must wear spacesuits while flying."

Just then the Starfly's hatch broke open and a large human in a flight suit and helmet jumped out. He gave a few orders to his two companions, who hurried from the docking bay. As the big man removed his helmet, Tash saw short-cropped gray hair and a friendly smile. The man shook their hands and said, "Welcome to Mining Station Alpha. I'm the chief miner, but we're a small outfit here, only me and the other two, so just call me Hodge."

Hoole bowed slightly. "We owe you our thanks. That slug would have swallowed us in moments."

Hodge nodded. "The asteroid field's infested with them. I knew one of those giant worms would get Fandomar one of these days."

"I was distracted," the Ithorian admitted, coming up behind.

"So!" Hodge clapped his hands together eagerly. "We don't get many visitors out here. What can we do for you?"

Hoole told Hodge the same story he'd told Fandomar, giving few details. "We need ethromite to power our ship."

Hodge nodded. "We got plenty of that. It may cost you, though."

Hoole nodded. "I am sure I have enough credits——"

Hodge waved his hands and grinned. "Nope, don't need credits. We make plenty off the Ithorians here." He chuckled at Fandomar. "I'd rather make a trade. If you're an anthropologist, you may be able to answer a few questions. I'll give you all the ethromite you need if you help us solve a little mystery."

Tash watched Hoole's expression. She could tell he wanted to get the ethromite as quickly as possible, but she also knew he loved to explore different cultures. "Very well. As long as it will put the children in no danger."

"Naw!" the big miner laughed. "No danger. Just a little space walk is all."

An hour later, Tash found herself walking on the surface of the asteroid. She was wearing a bulky spacesuit and a clear round fishbowl of a helmet. On her back she carried an oxygen tank and a small computer—the brains of the suit. The computer maintained a constant temperature inside the suit and pumped oxygen into her helmet.

Tash's heart pounded against her ribs. She craned her neck forward and touched her nose to the plastiform faceplate of her helmet. Only a thin sheet of plastiform protected her from the icy cold vacuum of space. Only a few layers of protective fabric kept her from instant death.

"Look up, Tash," Zak said. She heard his voice through the comlink speaker in her helmet.

Tash looked up and immediately felt dizzy. The asteroid field was just as frightening as before. In fact, it was scarier. Rocks the size of mountains hurtled over their heads. She felt just like one

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of the space rocks herself—spinning around, hurtling alone through the dark vacuum.

"There's no 'up' in space, laser brain," she told Zak irritably. "And there's no down, either. That's because there isn't any gravity."

Tash stamped her feet slowly. Her thick boots kicked up a cloud of dust that hung over the ground. The boots were specially designed for use on asteroids with zero gravity. The usual gravity boots—the kind used in spaceships—were equipped with magnetic soles so that they would stick to the metal of the ship. But since the ground on an asteroid was nonmagnetic, the miners used boots equipped with mini-tractor beams instead of magnets. The tractor beams pulled her feet toward the ground. On the planet Ithor, she would hardly be able to lift these boots. But in the weightlessness of space, they all had to wear special gravboots to keep from floating right off the asteroid.

They were marching along the asteroid's surface, with Hodge in the lead. Fandomar followed Hodge in a spacesuit specially designed to fit Ithorians' bodies. Then came Zak and Tash. Hoole brought up the rear.

Hodge led them to the edge of a giant pit. Unlike the rough surface of the asteroid, the sides of the pit were very smooth, as if something had been sliding in and out of it for years.

"A slug hole," Tash guessed.

"Right," Hodge's voice crackled over the comlink. "But the slug's long gone."

"How do we get down there?" Zak asked, peering down into the rocky tunnel.

"Like this," the miner said.

He jumped into the hole.

Without gravity, he might have hung in empty space forever. But his gray—boots pulled him downward, and slowly he began to descend into the slug tunnel. Fandomar followed a moment later.

Zak and Tash looked at Hoole, who gave the slightest nod.

They all jumped.

Tash fell in super slow motion. She had plenty of time for her eyes to adjust to the dark tunnel, and she watched the bottom slowly rise up to meet her. The tunnel wasn't very deep. It dropped straight down for a few dozen meters, then curved sharply to one side and leveled off. She landed at the curve with an easy bounce.

Hodge had lit a bright glowrod and motioned for them to follow him.

The cavern was huge. The slug that had filled the hole must have been a hundred meters thick.

Tash slid her hand along the wall as they continued their hike. It was as smooth as glass. She could hardly believe that any creature lived in deep space. It was amazing that the slugs didn't need air to breathe or sunlight for warmth.

Deep in thought, Tash didn't notice that the walls were closing in. The tunnel was tapering off. She didn't notice that the others had stopped moving until she bumped into something hard and gray standing in front of her. She looked up...

...into the face of an Ithorian, standing there without a spacesuit, its two mouths twisted into a look of absolute terror.

Chapter Four

Tash let out a warning shout right into her comlink microphone. Everyone around her jumped as the sound of her voice blasted into their helmets.

Zak put his gloved hands on the sides of his helmet as if he were trying to plug his ears. "Tash! Turn down the volume. It's only a——"

A statue. She could see that now. It was a statue of an Ithorian. It was holding both hands up in a warning gesture. In the light of Hodge's glowrod, the statue's face looked both angry and frightened.

"Curious," Hoole muttered. He was talking to himself, but they could all hear him as clearly as they'd heard Tash shout. The Shi'ido stepped past the statue. The tunnel ended just a few meters beyond. Set in the very end of the tunnel was a thick durasteel door.

Hodge pointed up to a hole in the tunnel ceiling. A shaft had been dug down from the surface of the asteroid. The chief miner explained, "We were digging down from the surface, looking for minerals. Our laser drill broke through into this empty space. We knew it had to be a worm tunnel, so we found the tunnel opening and used it to get down here. We found this."

"Fandomar," Hoole said after he'd examined the statue for a moment. "I was not aware that the Ithorians made statues like this. Most Ithorian artwork involves plants and animals. What do you make of this?"

Fandomar raised her hands. "I couldn't say."

Hodge held his glowrod up to the statue's face. "I've been around Ithorians enough to know their expressions. This one looks angry or frightened. Or both."

"It's like a warning," Tash said.

Zak scoffed. "There are a lot better ways to warn people," he said. "How about a holographic message? Warning beacons. Signs."

Hodge answered. "All that kind of stuff was here. At least we think it was."

He pointed to a section of the tunnel wall near the statue. Someone had cut an alcove into the smooth rock. In the alcove they saw the remains of a generator and a few strands of cable. The cable wires had been cut.

"This is how we found it," the chief miner explained. "Me and my boys don't normally go into worm holes. But we got readings on a good supply of minerals down here, so we risked it and found this. That doorway is sealed shut. We didn't know what to make of it."

"Maybe you should report it to the Ithorians," Tash suggested.

"We did," Hodge said, nodding toward Fandomar.

Fandomar blinked. "My people had no response."

Hoole looked from the statue to the cut wires and back to the statue again. Finally, he said, "I believe the statue is a warning. I suspect it is some sort of fail-safe in case the power supply for the true warning device ever failed." Hoole pointed to the base of the statue. A long rectangular section of the stone looked discolored. "It looks like someone removed something from the statue. Probably there was a written warning carved into the stone."

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Tash bent down to examine the spot. There had been a sign there. She could see that part of it had broken when the mysterious intruders had snapped it off. Even if Tash could have read the language, only parts of the words were visible.

"So who removed the warning?" Zak asked.

"And who put it here in the first place?" Tash added.

"Ithorians, obviously," Hoole decided. "I would guess that what lies behind that door is a tomb. But the question is: Why would Ithorians, who rarely leave their home planet, fly out to this barren asteroid field to bury someone, or something, in the bottom of a worm tunnel?"

Hodge grunted. "I was hoping you could help, being an anthropologist and all. I guess there's only one way to find out what it is."

Hoole shook his head. "I think we should get the permission of the Ithorians before doing anything here."

The chief miner replied, "It's not really their call. Me and my men own this rock now. I've been itching to find out what's behind this door. Whether it's a tomb or not, I figure there must be something important down here for someone to go to so much trouble. Could be worth a lot of money. If you can't tell me, I know another way to find out."

He strode past the statue toward the sealed door behind it. Tash noticed he had brought a long metal bar with him. It looked like a cross between an ax and a pry bar. With an expert thrust he jammed it into the door frame.

"No!" Fandomar suddenly shouted. "Stop!"

Hodge ignored her and pried at the door. The seal looked very old, but it held firm. He leaned his weight into his next push. A tiny crack appeared in the seal.

At that moment, Tash heard a tremendous *BOOM!* from behind them, and the solid rock beneath their feet shook as though a groundquake had begun. A cloud of dust shot up and hung in the air like a curtain.

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When the dust cleared, they could see that an enormous block of stone had dropped from the ceiling of the tunnel and crashed to the floor, closing off the way they had entered.

They were trapped inside the asteroid.

Chapter Five

The five explorers hurried toward the stone and pushed. It wouldn't budge.

"A trap," Hoole muttered into his comlink. "I should have suspected. This tomb, or whatever it is, was not meant to be opened."

"I gotta agree with you now," Hodge said. "No more messing with the door." He flipped a switch on his comlink. "Alpha Station, this is Hodge." He waited. "Alpha Station, this is Hodge. Do you copy?" The only answer he got was static. He grunted. "The signal's not getting through. The rock's too thick."

"They'll come looking for us, won't they?" Tash asked.

"Yeah," Hodge agreed. He checked the monitor attached to his wrist. "I hope our air holds out long enough."

Tash looked at her own wrist. A small screen display showed how much air she had left in her tank. She had enough oxygen for another twenty minutes. After that, she would suffocate inside her spacesuit.

"Uncle Hoole," she asked, "can't you... do something?"

She wanted to say "Can't you shape-shift?" but she knew Hoole liked to keep his powers to himself if possible.

Hoole shook his head and said simply, "No air."

It took Tash a moment to realize what he meant. As far as she knew, her uncle could change into any living creature—even a creature like a Wookiee that was big and strong enough to lift the block of stone. But Wookiees had to breathe, and there was no air outside their spacesuits.

Besides, Tash guessed, he might not be able to shape-shift while he's inside the suit.

She glanced from face to face, hoping someone would have a suggestion. When her eyes fell on Fandomar, she realized that the Ithorian had said almost nothing. She was standing off to one side. She looked as if she were ready to stay in the tunnel forever.

"I've got an idea," Hodge said. "But it might be dangerous."

"Don't worry," Zak snorted. "We're getting used to danger."

Hodge's plan was simple. The shaft the miners had dug into the tunnel went straight up to the surface of the asteroid. All they had to do was stand beneath it, deactivate their gravity boots, and float right up to the surface.

"Only problem is," the chief miner ended, "the shaft's too narrow for anyone but the kids."

"No problem," Zak said. "I'm on my way."

Tash hesitated for a moment. She thought she ought to volunteer ahead of her younger brother. But the thought of being alone on the asteroid's surface scared her. She decided to let Zak take the lead.

Hodge, however, disagreed. "Sorry, son, but I think your shoulders are a little too wide." The miner held his hands up to Zak's shoulders. "Yep, you're wider than our laser drill." Hodge kept his hands the same distance apart and measured Tash's shoulders. "But you can make it."

Tash was shocked. Since when was Zak bigger than she was? She stared at her younger brother. She was still taller than he was. But Zak had started to fill out. Tash shook her head. She really was out of touch. She hadn't even noticed her own little brother growing up.

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She took a deep breath. "Okay." Hoole stepped between her and Hodge. "Tash——" he started to say; then he stopped. The gray-faced Shi'ido looked around as though he were trying to find another solution. When he couldn't find one, he looked back at Tash. An expression of concern flickered across his face; then he said, "Be careful."

Hodge led Tash to a spot a few meters away from the statue. Looking up, she saw the mineshaft disappear into the darkness. "Remember," she heard Hodge say, "be sure to reactivate your boots the moment you clear the tunnel."

She nodded. Then she reached down and pressed a button on the heel of each shoe.

Immediately, Tash felt herself become weightless. Her feet were still touching the rocky floor, but she didn't feel connected to it anymore.

Taking a deep breath, she jumped upward and began to slowly rise toward the ceiling. Or was the ceiling dropping down to meet her? She couldn't tell.

She touched the tunnel with her gloved hands and guided herself straight into the mineshaft. Her space helmet and shoulders just barely fit into the hole.

It got dark very, very quickly.

"Good job, Tash!" she heard Zak cheer.

"Well done," Hoole's voice added.

She thought she heard someone else speak, but the voice was cut off by static. The thick rock interfered with their short-range comlinks.

She was alone in the dark.

With no sound and no light and the strange feeling that she was hardly even moving, Tash felt really alone.

It must have only been a few minutes, but it felt as if she'd been floating for hours.

Just when she started to panic, her head suddenly cleared the tunnel. She had reached the surface! Starlight glittered on the dusty asteroid. A shower of asteroids rushed by overhead. After

the darkness of the tunnel, all the movement made her dizzy and she forgot what she was supposed to do next. She was floating ten meters above the surface before she remembered to reactivate her boots.

The tractor beams kicked in. She felt as if something had grabbed hold of her ankles. She settled gently onto the surface.

Bounding across the zero-gravity terrain, she made a quick trip back to the mining colony. She was so eager to find help, she didn't notice that three additional Starflies had suddenly appeared inside the docking bay. As she entered the air-filled halls of the colony, she pulled off her helmet and shouted, "Help! Somebody help us!"

"Why, whatever can I do for you, my dear?" said a voice as thin and sharp as a razor blade.

As Tash turned toward the voice, a wave of sheer terror overwhelmed her. She recognized the feeling. It was the dark side of the Force. She had felt it only once before, in the presence of Darth Vader! She felt it again now, like an ice-cold blast of air all around her.

It was going to freeze her heart.

Chapter Six

The man who had spoken was tall, and thin like a skeleton. He was dressed entirely in black. His head was bald and his skin was dark. Tattoos covered the lower part of his face. Strangest of all, he wore a band of black cloth over both eyes.

If he even has eyes, Tash thought. But he had to be able to see. He was staring right at her, and when he took a step closer, he moved easily across the room.

How does he see? she wondered.

Then she felt another wave of dark-side energy crash against her. The man was reaching out with the dark side of the Force, using it the way insects used their antennae to feel their way around.

The tattooed man's dark-side energy wasn't quite as powerful as the feeling she'd gotten from Darth Vader months ago. This man wasn't as strong as Vader. But he was almost as evil.

Behind him, Tash saw the other two miners sitting quietly and nervously. Two stormtroopers stood at attention on either side of them, blasters in hand.

The Empire. If they knew who Tash was, then she, Zak, and Hoole were doomed.

"Who——?" she started to ask.

"Never mind," the man in black replied. "Where are the others?"

Tash told him. The man clenched his jaw. "Have they opened the door?"

"No, sir," she replied. Her mouth was dry.

He relaxed a bit. A slight smile crossed his face, wrinkling the weird tattoos on his jaw. "Then they may yet live."

The members of the exploring party were back in the mining colony, removing their suits just as the last of their oxygen was used up.

The man in black had sent his two stormtroopers with Tash. They had found a mechanism that lifted the block of stone from the outside, and had easily freed the prisoners. The troopers had then marched them back to the mining colony at gunpoint. Now Zak, Tash, Hoole, and Fandomar sat in the main hall of the mining facility with Hodge and the other two miners.

"My name," the man in black began, "is Jerec. I am a servant of His Imperial Majesty, the Emperor."

Tash felt Hoole tense beside her. If Jerec knew who they were, they'd have to fight their way out of the room.

But if Jerec had heard of these three criminals, he wasn't interested. "That tunnel and its contents are now the property of the Empire," he declared. "Entry is forbidden."

"But we own the deed to that mine!" Hodge protested. "It belongs to——"

"You may discuss it," Jerec said in a voice like a vibroblade, "with the Emperor. I can arrange a personal interview."

The way he said "interview" made it sound more like "torture." Hodge said nothing.

Hoole filled the silence. "I feel you should know that, whatever is buried down there, the Ithorians seem sure that it should not be dug up."

"What the Ithorians want is no concern of mine," Jerec snapped.

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"But...", Fandomar began. It was the first time she'd spoken in over an hour. "But it could be... dangerous."

Jerec turned toward Fandomar. Again, even though his eyes were hidden behind the black band, Tash felt that he was *seeing* something. The presence of the dark side grew stronger. This man definitely knew how to use the Force——for evil.

"You are Fandomar," Jerec stated. "Your husband is Momaw Nadon, the Ithorian in exile."

"Yes," she confessed.

"Then I would be quiet, if I were you," Jerec said threateningly. "Unless you want me to tell your people your husband's last little secret."

Fandomar closed both her mouths.

Jerec turned to Hodge. "You will take me to this tunnel, and there you will tell me everything you know about it. Now."

Hodge hesitated. "I don't think this is a good time."

Jerec snapped his fingers and one of the stormtroopers put a blaster to Hodge's head. "You will take me to this tunnel now, or your friends will wipe your remains off the floor."

Hodge's face turned pale. "Whatever you say. It's just that this is prime hunting time for the space slugs. They'll be more alert than usual, and you never know when a slug's asteroid will pass right overhead. It would be better to wait a few hours until they calm down again."

For a moment, Jerec did not move. Tash felt her skin crawl as waves of dark-side power passed through her again. She knew that Jerec was trying to tell whether Hodge was being honest.

"Very well," Jerec said. He turned to his stormtroopers. "Disable this station's comlink antenna. No one is allowed to send messages from this lifeless rock. Then stand guard over all the ships." He smiled cruelly. "No one is allowed on or off this asteroid until I have examined that tunnel."

"What do you think he wants?" Zak whispered to Tash.

They were sitting in what must have been the mining facility's entertainment room. There was a hologame board, several vidscreens, and shelves full of holodisks. Tash and Zak hadn't touched any of them. Instead, they'd settled in front of a small computer. Tash was riffling through its files.

None of the Imperials were in the room. Jerec had accepted Uncle Hoole's story, which was mostly true anyway, that they'd been on their way to the planet Bespin when they'd stopped at Ithor for supplies. The Imperial had seemed more interested in relaying messages to his Star Destroyer, which was hovering just outside the asteroid field. With his mind focused on other things, Jerec had hardly paid any attention to them at all.

Even though no Imperials were in sight, Tash whispered anyway. "I don't know. He talks like he knows what's behind that door. And he wants it."

"Then it can't be good," her brother said.

"I agree," Hoole said. The Shi'ido had sneaked up on them again, giving Zak and Tash a start.

"Uncle Hoole!" Zak said, clutching his heart. "You know, you're almost as scary as that Jerec."

"Do you know anything about him?" Tash asked. "I mean, is he human? Why does he wear that black band over his eyes?"

"And those tattoos on his face," Zak said. "Are they natural, or did someone put them there?"

Hoole shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm unfamiliar with Jerec. He appears human, but I suspect he is not. My guess is that blindness is natural to his species. However, this is no time to question him about his origin."

Hoole pointed to the screen. "Besides, I came to ask questions, not answer them. I thought I would find you at a computer, Tash. Have you had any luck finding information?"

Tash sighed and admitted, "No. The miners did a lot of research about Ithor when they built this place. The records go back thousands of years. There are records for almost every herd

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ship, every day, for two thousand years. I can tell you almost anything you would want to know about Ithor. But there's nothing about this asteroid."

"Do you get the feeling Fandomar knows more than she's saying?" Zak asked. "She was awfully quiet while we were trying to figure out how to get out of the tunnel."

Tash nodded. "Yeah, I noticed that, too. But I don't think she knew about the trap. There's no way she'd do anything to hurt us."

"Why not?" Zak asked.

"The Law of Life, remember? Fandomar wouldn't hurt a Circarpousian swamp fly, let alone another sentient being," Tash said.

"Maybe she's decided to break the law," Zak suggested. "Her husband's an outlaw, after all."

Hoole nodded. "Jerec mentioned Fandomar's husband, Momaw Nadon. She said he was exiled from Ithor. Can you find out what he did?"

Tash nodded. "Already did. According to the records, the Ithorians know a lot about gene-splicing."

"Is that like making clones?" Zak asked.

"Not exactly," Hoole replied. "Clones are exact copies. In gene-splicing, scientists combine the genes of many different life-forms to make a new one."

Tash continued, "Apparently the Ithorians kept their knowledge to themselves. Momaw Nadon was a High Priest, so he knew all about that stuff. Some Imperial wanted this secret knowledge and forced Momaw to tell him. Even though Momaw did it to save lives, the Ithorians banished him for revealing their secrets."

"That is not prime," Zak muttered. "Gene-splicing. Imperials," Hoole muttered. He wrinkled his dark brow. He looked as if he were trying to put together the pieces of a puzzle. "Tash, you said there was a record for *almost* every day. Is something missing?"

His niece nodded. "There's a gap in the records. For almost a hundred years, nothing is recorded. Then the records start again without mentioning the missing time."

"Curious," Hoole mused. "Perhaps——"

But he was interrupted by one of the stormtroopers, who stomped into the room and growled, "Time to go."

In the docking bay, under the stormtrooper's watchful eye, Hoole and the two Arrandas slipped into their spacesuits. Jerec, already dressed in a protective suit, waited impatiently.

The other stormtrooper marched into the docking bay with one of the miners and reported. "I could only find this man. Hodge and the other miner are missing."

"Where are they?" Jerec demanded.

"Here I am!" said Hodge. He came trotting into the docking bay already dressed in his flight suit. He smiled, but his eyes flitted nervously from person to person. He seemed to be looking for something.

"Where is your companion?" Jerec demanded. Hodge hesitated for a fraction of a second. "He went ahead to make sure it was safe."

Tash could tell that Jerec was suspicious. He ordered one of his stormtroopers to remain behind and guard the Starflies to make sure no one left the asteroid. Then he led the way out onto the surface, with the others following. The second stormtrooper brought up the rear. Tash couldn't help noticing that his blaster was set to kill.

They marched along, back toward the slug tunnel. The asteroid was as lifeless as before——except for one change. In the distance, near the tunnel entrance, they could see a small, white figure. As they got nearer, they saw that it was a man in a spacesuit.

"There he is," Hodge said. "I told you he was just making sure it's safe."

They continued toward him. The man did not move. He stood there, waiting for them.

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They drew nearer, and still the figure didn't move. He stood perfectly still. Even from a distance, Tash could tell there was something strange about the way he was standing. As they came within a few dozen meters, she realized what it was. He was holding both hands above his head.

He had been holding them above his head the *whole* time.

They reached the mine. The figure still hadn't taken a single step, and his arms were still reaching over his head.

Tash blinked. His arms weren't reaching. They were floating.

Inside his space helmet, the miner's face was frozen in an expression of horror.

Even though he was standing on his feet, the man in the spacesuit was obviously dead.

Chapter Seven

By the look on the miner's face, whatever had killed him had filled him with surprise and terror.

It reminded her of the look on the face of the Ithorian statue.

"But if he's dead, how is he still... standing there?" she whispered.

"Gravboots," Jerec said. He pointed at the miner's feet. The mini-tractor beams in the victim's gravity boots were still functioning. They had pinned his feet to the surface of the asteroid while the rest of his body tried to float away.

Taking command of the situation, Jerec approached the body. "So this is the man you sent out to make sure the trail was safe," he sneered. "It would appear that it is safe. At least from space slugs."

"What happened to him?" Tash asked.

Jerec reached behind the miner's head and tugged at the hose connecting his air tank to his suit. It came away in two pieces.

"No air," the Imperial said.

Fandomar whispered, "What a terrible accident."

Jerec snorted. "This was no accident. Look at this air hose. It's been cut through by something sharp. A vibroblade or a laser torch." Jerec looked up. Even through his blindfold, he appeared to glare at them. "This man was murdered."

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"But there's no one on the asteroid except us," Hoole said. "And we were all in the mining facility."

"Perhaps," Jerec said. "Perhaps not. I obviously should have brought more guards with me. All of you were out of my sight during at least part of our wait. So unless someone else has sneaked onto the asteroid, I'm sure one of you is a killer."

Tash shuddered as Jerec's skull-like face turned in her direction. She could feel his dark-side power sweep over her like a scanner. Then it passed on to Zak and Hoole.

Tash wondered who could have committed such a horrible act. If it wasn't Jerec himself (which was possible, she thought, since the Imperials had done worse things), then who? It obviously wasn't Zak or Uncle Hoole. Hodge and the other miner weren't likely suspects. Why would they kill their own friend, especially with so many witnesses around? That left only one person.

Fandomar.

Tash stole a glance at the Ithorian. She had certainly been acting strange since they'd discovered the warning and the tomb. Tash remembered how Fandomar had yelled, "No!" as Hodge tried to break through the sealed door. She'd seemed to know what would happen next. And once they were trapped, she had done nothing to help find a way out.

Then there was the connection between her husband and the Empire.

Whatever was happening, Tash thought, it was all connected to that strange room, or tomb, or whatever it was, at the bottom of the tunnel.

But Tash couldn't believe that Fandomar had killed the miner. Fandomar seemed so dedicated to the Ithorian Law of Life. Not only had she saved Zak from the vesuvague tree, but she had also defended the actions of the tree itself when Tash thought it should be destroyed.

Besides, Tash didn't get the same sort of dangerous feeling from Fandomar that she got from Jerec. She didn't know if it was

her Force sensitivity or just plain common sense, but Tash could tell that Fandomar simply wasn't the kind of being who could kill.

These thoughts raced through her head as they traveled through the tunnel. Jerec did not wait for a glowrod—maybe he didn't need one. He walked ahead of the others, muttering, and soon was out of sight.

At the end of the tunnel, Tash could see indentations in the floor where the stone barrier had fallen. Beyond it stood the weird statue, and beyond that, the tomb. There was no sign of Jerec.

But the door stood open.

Cautiously, they approached the door. Hodge looked frustrated, like a man watching someone else steal his treasure. Fandomar didn't move at all. Hoole crept forward, with Zak and Tash right behind him.

In the silence of space, Tash thought she could hear her own heart pounding more loudly than a ship's engine. Hoole's words ran through her mind: *This tomb was not meant to be opened.*

But someone—Jerec?—had opened it.

Hoole reached the half-opened door. Carefully, he leaned inside to try to get a better look around. Suddenly, before Tash and Zak could even blink, something grabbed hold of Hoole and pulled him into the room!

Tash lunged forward without thinking, slipping through the doorway to help her uncle.

She didn't get a good look at the room beyond. She was too surprised at what she saw in front of her.

Jerec had grabbed the front of Hoole's tunic and lifted him off the ground with one hand. Tash realized that the Imperial must be immensely strong to overcome the force of the gravboots with just one arm.

"Where is it?" Jerec demanded angrily.

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Hoole's calm face stared directly into Jerec's. "I do not know what 'it' is. I told you, we are here by coincidence. I have no information."

Jerec looked as if he was trying to control his rage. Finally, he set Hoole down on the floor. Hoole's face remained calm, but Tash thought she detected an angry fire in her uncle's eyes.

"If I find out you were involved in this, I'll have you skinned alive," Jerec growled.

Hoole straightened the front of his spacesuit. "Perhaps if you tell me what has happened, I can be of service."

Jerec snarled and pointed to the center of the room. For the first time, Tash looked around. She was in a small circular chamber. The room was bare except for a pedestal in the very center.

"When I got here I found the door to the tomb open," Jerec snarled. "And it was completely empty!"

Chapter Eight

As Jerec had stated, the tomb was bare. Tash could see that the pedestal had once held something, but the something had been removed.

Hoole considered. "Obviously, whoever murdered that miner came here and stole the contents of this room. Do you know what was here?"

Jerec sneered. "That is none of your concern."

By now the others had entered the room. Fandomar pushed her way past the others. Staring at the empty pedestal in wide-eyed horror, she let out a scream with her twin mouths that nearly shattered Tash's eardrums through the comlink. "Nnnnnnooooooooooo!"

Then Fandomar fainted.

It took a few minutes to revive her. When she came to her senses, Tash could see that her eyes were full of fear. They darted frantically from one person to the next. When Fandomar's eyes fell on her, Tash knew that Fandomar was *looking* for something. Not something on Tash's face, but something inside her. But she didn't know what.

"What is wrong with *you*?" Jerec demanded scornfully.

Fandomar studied Jerec carefully. Earlier, she had timidly avoided staring at him. Now she looked into his face. Again,

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Tash had the eerie feeling that Fandomar was trying to see something that was underneath Jerec's skin.

Finally, Fandomar answered in a whisper, "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I apologize."

Jerec ignored Fandomar and turned to Hodge. He loomed threateningly over the chief miner as he growled, "And you. I delayed reaching this place on your advice. If I find out that you are involved with this, I'll have you vaporized."

Hodge only shrugged.

While Jerec raged and the others tried to console Fandomar, Hoole studied the pedestal. Like the statue, the pedestal was decorated with carved designs. These had been hastily scraped away, but again, just as at the statue, a few symbols remained.

"See anything, Uncle Hook?" Tash asked.

Hoole studied the remaining symbols a moment longer. "I am not sure. Someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to remove any clues as to the nature of this tomb. But I suspect that there was never any treasure here. There are no indications that there were any containers or devices in here. If there was nothing valuable, why would anyone hide this room? Yet someone obviously thought it was important enough to kill for. For once," the Shi'do admitted, "I seem to have more questions than answers."

"Speaking of questions," Zak added, "I have one. Has anyone else noticed the door?"

They all turned. Zak pointed at the heavy durasteel door that had sealed the tomb. Zak explained, "Look. The door opens outward, into the tunnel. But don't swinging doors usually open in, especially when they're locked?"

"Right!" Tash agreed. "Like in a house, the door opens in so that the people inside can lock it and keep strangers out."

Zak nodded furiously. "But this door opened into the tunnel. Which means that it wasn't designed to keep people out——"

"It was designed to keep something in," Tash said. Her face turned pale.

Hoole frowned. "And whatever it is, it is now free." Tash felt a cold shadow pass over her and realized that Jerec was standing behind her. She shuddered, wondering if he could sense her tiny Force power the way she could feel his dark side.

"Your detective work bores me," the Imperial sneered. "And it is not needed here. I suggest you end it. Or I shall end it for you."

The stormtrooper fingered his blaster, leaving no doubt in Tash's mind just how Jerec would end things.

Jerec led them back to the mining facility at a rapid pace. Again, the stormtrooper brought up the rear... but this time Tash felt sure he was waiting eagerly for Jerec's order to shoot them all in the back.

They passed the body of the miner, still held in place by his gray-boots. Hodge and the other miner wanted to take the body with them, but Jerec refused to let them stop.

Tash stared straight ahead, fixing her eyes on the mining colony in the distance. It was the only safe place to look. She dared not glance up, where the storm of asteroids continued to spin crazily in the darkness of space. Looking to either side, all she could see was the lifeless rock of the asteroid. And behind her marched Jerec's stormtrooper.

She found herself wishing she were back on Ithor. The forest had been so beautiful, so full of life. Remembering her brief experience with the Bafforr trees, she felt a warm glow spread through her, right down to her fingertips. She suddenly felt stifled inside the bulky spacesuit. She felt trapped. She wanted to

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get out of this place. Everything would be all right if she could just get off the asteroid.

But until then, the closest thing to safety was the mining colony. Then they could take the cargo ship back to Ithor. If Jerec didn't kill them outright, or discover who they were first.

Finally they reached the airlock that led into the miners' outpost. Jerec's other stormtrooper was waiting there. By the time Tash stepped through the airlock, Jerec, Hoole, and Zak were already inside the docking bay. Although they all still had their space helmets on, Zak had removed his gray-boots.

"I always wondered what it was like to fly!" he joked. He kicked his feet off the ground and floated toward the ceiling. "This is prime!"

"I'm repressurizing the airlock," Hodge said, once everyone was inside. He pulled a large handle. There was soft click, a rush of air...and an enormous explosion.

Chapter Nine

Tash and the others were thrown to the floor as a loud *BOOM!* echoed inside their space helmets. The deafening sound seemed to go on forever.

Then Tash realized that the sound she heard wasn't a continuing explosion—it was the howling of air rushing out of the airlock. The explosion had blown a hole through the airlock door, and the sealed atmosphere of the mining facility was now being sucked into space.

"Helmets on!" Hoole commanded. Tash had just started to remove hers, and had barely snapped it back into place before the wind tried to tear it right off her head.

The howling wind tugged at her, but she quickly grabbed hold of a metal rail along the wall. The combination of her tight grip and the gray-boots held her in place. The others, too, grabbed hold of the closest thing they could find to keep from being sucked out of the airlock.

Zak was not so lucky.

He had still been floating in the zero-gravity room without his boots when the explosion happened. He hovered in the air long enough to make eye contact with his sister before the wind grabbed him with great force and sent him tumbling through the hole in the wall.

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"Zak!" Tash screamed. Releasing her grip on the railing, she let the powerful wind push her toward the hole, the gray-boots slowing her movements. When she reached the hole, she braced herself on the wall and looked out into space. By the time she spotted him, Zak was a small white dot tumbling head over heels into the asteroid field.

"Tash, help!" she heard Zak's voice inside her helmet's comlink.

Then he vanished from sight.

Tash turned to the nearest person, Jerec, and pleaded, "We've got to help him!"

Jerec ignored her. He had hardly noticed Zak's disappearance. The Imperial was scanning the room. "The Ithorian," he muttered. "That Ithorian is missing." He turned to his stormtroopers. "This must be her doing. Find her! I want that Hammerhead!"

Most of the mining station's air had escaped by now. With less oxygen sealed inside the walls, there was less pressure, and the wind died down. By the time the two stormtroopers churned into motion, there was hardly a breeze left, and then nothing at all.

The stormtroopers opened the inner door of the airlock and hurried into the facility with Jerec close behind them.

That left Hoole, Tash, and the two miners. But Hodge and his partner were unwilling to help. "We've got to try to contain this explosion. We've got a fortune in minerals in this place!" the chief miner apologized as they hurried out of the room.

"Uncle Hoole, what do we do?" Tash started to ask. She stopped. Hoole was already halfway to the row of yellow Starflies parked along one wall.

"I've never flown one of these before!" she said as her uncle climbed into the nearest craft.

"Neither have I," Hoole replied grimly. "I suspect Zak would tell us we were going to take a crash course. Get in."

Tash jumped into another of the tiny ships. She was surprised to find the cockpit was quite large—until she remembered that the Starfly didn't carry its own oxygen. The pilot had to wear space gear, so the designers had added extra room to fit the bulky suits.

The controls were basic, and Tash had the engines fired up in seconds. "Tash, do you copy?" Hoole's calm voice came over the comlink. It steadied her trembling hands.

"Yes," she said into the microphone. "What are we going to do?"

"We must fly into the asteroids and grab him with the ship's tractor beams, just as the miners rescued us," her uncle explained.

We must fly into the asteroids.

Tash shuddered. It was bad enough to have the asteroids rocketing through the sky over her head. Flying through them—that was like daring the space rocks to smash them.

Hoole seemed to read her thoughts. "Don't worry, Tash. Starflies were made for this type of work. Keep your eyes open and trust your skills. Let's go."

Hoole's Starfly lifted off the deck and accelerated toward the hole in the wall.

For an instant, Tash was frozen. She tried to force her hands to work the controls, but they wouldn't move.

Think of Zak, she told herself. She took a deep breath, the kind that had always made her feel calm. Relaxed. Closer to the Force.

Her hands moved.

Before she knew it, her Starfly had slipped out of the docking bay and was rising from the asteroid's surface. She could see Hoole's ship like a bright yellow dot against the black field of space. She hit her thrusters and sped to catch up.

Suddenly, an asteroid the size of a bantha dropped into view, tumbling toward her viewscreen. The Starfly seemed to leap out of the asteroid's path with a mind of its own.

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Tash looked down at her controls. She had moved the ship without thinking! Her arms tingled. Wasn't this how she'd felt in the past when she'd used the Force? And wasn't it just how she'd felt when she tried to talk to the Bafforr trees?

Tash moved the controls again, and her Starfly looped easily around the next space rock.

She almost laughed out loud. She felt as if she were playing speed globe again. Only now she was the globe, and all the asteroids were trying to catch her!

It's like I can predict where they're coming from and where they're going, she thought. Almost like... I'm connected to them.

Tash knew that the Force was an energy field that connected all living things. Did it apply to space rocks, too?

More than ever, she wished that someone could answer her questions. She wished...

Whatever she wished, she forgot it the next instant, as her eyes fell on a small white object turning slow circles toward a giant asteroid—an asteroid even larger than the one the miners lived on. The surface of the asteroid was covered in holes and caverns. In one of those caverns, Tash could see a space slug huddling, its mouth slowly opening and closing like that of a fish in water.

The small white object was Zak.

He was heading right into the space slug's mouth.

Chapter Ten

Zak was about to be swallowed by the space slug.

Tash felt the tingling sensation leave her body. The asteroids that had seemed easy to dodge a moment ago swirled around her again. She jerked the controls hard to avoid one rock and nearly smashed into another.

"Uncle Hoole, help!" she called out.

"Stay calm, Tash," the Shi'ido's steady voice replied. "I'll distract the space slug while you try to grab hold of Zak."

"I-I can't!"

There was a pause. Then Hoole said, "Yes, you can. A moment ago you were flying this asteroid field like it was an obstacle course back on the playground on Alderaan. You can do it."

Tash felt her palms start to sweat, but since they were trapped inside her gloves, she had no way to wipe them dry. Hoole was right. She could do it. She *had* to do it.

There was no time left to be afraid. The space slug lunged out of its hole toward Zak.

Hoole's Starfly tilted its nose toward the space slug and fired its thrusters, diving toward the creature. Its lasers fired, sending two beams of white-hot energy into the giant worm's hide. It was like pricking a bantha with a needle, but the shots distracted the

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worm enough to make it swerve aside, looking for whatever had attacked it. Jaws that could crush an Imperial walker chomped down just as Hoole slipped out of its way.

Sprranng!

Tash felt something bounce off the side of her Starfly and thanked the Force that it had only been a mini-asteroid. Anything larger would have crushed her. Taking a deep breath, she punched her thrusters to full power and shot toward her brother.

An asteroid seemed to appear out of nowhere. She turned her ship in a tight spin and slipped around it.

Two asteroids headed right for one another. Tash eased off her thrusters as the rocks collided in front of her.

But the two smashed asteroids had turned into a hundred smaller rocks. There was no way to avoid them. Tash closed her eyes tight and moved her control stick, flying totally by feel.

When she opened her eyes, she'd passed through the debris untouched.

Zak was right in front of her now. She was close enough to see his arms waving helplessly in the void. She could see his frightened eyes. They were as wide as a Rodian's. But they weren't staring at Tash. They were staring into the mouth of the space slug. As wide and bottomless as a black hole, it reached out as Zak hurtled forward.

"Activating tractor beam," Tash said, reaching for the right button without even knowing it.

A beam of pale white light reached out from her Starfly and touched Zak. Instantly, her brother stopped his tumble through space.

The space slug's jaws slammed down less than a dozen meters from Zak. If the tractor beam hadn't caught him, Zak would have been on the inside of its mouth rather than the outside.

Hoole's Starfly flashed into view, blasters blazing. Energy bolts pounded the space slug's head. It thrashed about angrily for a moment, then retreated into its cave.

STAR WARS: Spore

Tash found the control knob that pulled the tractor beam in, drawing Zak toward her ship. "Zak, do you copy?" she asked into her comlink.

"Y——Yeah," came a weak, trembling voice. "But I think I've had enough spacewalking for one day."

Using the tractor beam, Tash drew her brother toward her ship until he could reach out and touch the hull.

Quickly, she popped open the top of her Starfly and pulled him inside. "Is there room?" he asked.

"I think so," she replied. "There's some space behind the seat. Curl up back there. And hurry. I want to get out of here before another asteroid comes our way."

They reached the mining facility in minutes, with Hoole flying just behind them. When they landed, they were surprised to find that the Starflies Jerec and his men had used to reach the asteroid were gone. The Imperials had left the asteroid and returned to their Star Destroyer.

A low rumble in the rock beneath their feet told them why. "The asteroid's unstable after that explosion," said Hodge as they walked into the main room. He and his partner, still wearing their spacesuits, were stuffing a few personal items into travel packs. Fandomar sat in a corner, nervously adjusting her space helmet.

Hodge went on: "We're safe for a few minutes, but we've got to evacuate immediately."

"Can we take off our spacesuits now?" Zak asked.

"No!" Fandomar almost shouted.

Hodge explained, "The explosion knocked out the environmental controls. There's no air."

"What caused the explosion?" Hoole asked. He glanced at Fandomar. "Jerec seemed to think it was sabotage."

Hodge shrugged. "Hard to tell. Could have been a malfunction or sabotage."

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Tash couldn't help asking, "Fandomar... where were you during the explosion?"

"I-I was——" the Ithorian stammered, "I was... a——alone."

Tash swallowed. That wasn't much of an alibi.

Hodge, however, didn't seem concerned about who might have set off the explosion. "All I care about now is getting off this rock and down to Ithor. Fandomar's going to take us."

The six survivors hurried aboard Fandomar's cargo ship as the Ithorian sealed the hatch. "Don't remove your spacesuits," she warned. "I managed to repair the damage done by the space slug, but this explosion has caused a loss of environmental controls. No air. Your suits must stay on until we reach Ithor."

"Great," Zak groaned, dropping down into a flight chair. "I'll never get out of this suit."

"Tash, Zak, would you come with me, please?" Hoole asked.

The two Arrandas followed their uncle out of the cockpit. Behind the pilot's room lay one small cargo hold, then another larger one beyond that. Hoole passed through each cargo hold, shutting the doors tightly behind him. When they reached the back of the ship, Hoole spoke into his comlink. "Fandomar? Fandomar, do you copy?"

When there was no answer, he nodded. "Good. The cargo doors are blocking the signal, so she can't hear us." He looked at his niece and nephew. "Tash, Zak, I am afraid we must consider an unpleasant possibility." He paused. "Fandomar may be a murderer."

"No!" Tash replied. "She couldn't be. She's too gentle."

Hoole nodded. "I know how she seems. But she is the only being without an alibi for the time the miner was murdered."

Tash shook her head. "Hodge and the other miner were out of sight, too."

Zak shrugged. "Yeah, but why would they kill their own partner? Especially with Imperials in the neighborhood?"

Hoole agreed with Zak. "And Fandomar was the only person not present when the explosion occurred. She must have slipped away as soon as we returned to the mining facility."

"But why would she kill someone? And blow up the miners' station?" Tash asked.

Her uncle replied, "I do not know. All of this is somehow connected to the tomb on the asteroid. Something was kept at the bottom of that tunnel. I am not sure what it was, but I have at least a few clues."

Tash and Zak listened closely as their uncle lowered his voice even more. "The writing on the inner chamber was somewhat clearer than on the sign at the base of the statue. I read the word *Spore*."

"Spore?" Zak asked. "What's that? A person?"

"I'm not sure," the Shi'ido admitted. "But there were dates written on the inner room as well. They were nearly destroyed, but I believe they match the dates Tash mentioned. The dates when all Ithorian records were missing."

Zak wrinkled his brow. "I'm getting a headache. So we've got a mysterious time in history the Ithorians didn't want to record, and something called Spore buried on an asteroid. Then we have an Imperial who wants this Spore, a miner who gets murdered for it, and an explosion that drives everyone off the asteroid."

"Do not forget," Hoole added, "that Fandomar volunteered to fly the shuttle from the planet to the asteroid. That meant that she could keep her eye on the miners..."

"To see if they discovered the tomb!" Zak finished. "Of course! She knows what this Spore is and wants it for herself."

Tash clicked her tongue in frustration. "She's an Ithorian. What about the Law of Life?"

"We must remember that Fandomar's husband has already disobeyed Ithorian law," Hoole replied. "He gave secrets to the Empire. Fandomar may be equally unpredictable."

Tash didn't agree.

"I just don't believe it," she said stubbornly.

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"Help!" a voice suddenly shouted loudly enough to be picked up by their comlinks.

Tash, Zak, and Hoole rushed toward the front of the ship in time to see that one of the ship's hatches had been opened. Stars twinkled in the darkness beyond.

Fandomar stood in the doorway, shoving one of the miners out into the void.

Chapter Eleven

The miner's fingers clung desperately to the edges of the hatch. He tried to pull himself back into the ship, but Fandomar grabbed hold of his hands and pried them loose. Not until that moment did Tash realize that the long, delicate Ithorian fingers were also incredibly strong.

"Help! Help!" the miner cried, but it was too late. He was kicked free of the ship's hull. Even on sublight drive, the cargo ship was traveling incredibly fast. He was floating through space ten kilometers behind the ship before anyone could move.

Hoole drew a blaster from the pouch in his spacesuit. Briefly, Tash wondered where he'd gotten it. Her uncle almost never used weapons. He usually relied on his incredible shape-shifting ability in time of need. But she guessed that his power was as limited here as it had been near the asteroid tomb.

"Do not move," the Shi'ido said, his voice like hard stone.

Fandomar hardly looked at the blaster. "He'll be fine, he'll be fine!" she said, almost to herself. "He's got enough oxygen in his tank to last almost twenty-four hours. We can send a rescue ship out to get him as soon as we reach the planet."

This took Tash totally by surprise. She could see that it had shocked her uncle, too. "If you want to rescue him, why throw him off the ship in the first place?" Hoole asked.

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"Oooohhhhh."

A low moan came from the floor near their feet. Tash saw that Hodge lay in the corner. Moving awkwardly in his bulky spacesuit, the chief miner staggered to his feet. He shook his head and muttered, "S——Somebody dropped sleeping gas into my air tank."

Tash felt her face turn red, and a hot tear welled up in her eye. She didn't know whether to be embarrassed or horrified or angry or all three at once. "You were going to kill Hodge, too," she whispered. "Were we next?"

Fandomar shook her head. She was crying. The sobbing from her twin throats was pitifully sad. "I-I haven't killed anyone. And I wouldn't have touched you, Tash. I knew it couldn't be any of you. You were in the mining facility the whole time."

"What whole time?" Zak asked.

Hoole kept his blaster steady on the Ithorian. "Fandomar, I think it is time you told us what is happening here."

Fandomar's two mouths trembled. "It's Spore," she whispered.

A soft alarm sounded.

"It is nothing," Hoole said, sparing a quick glance at the instrument panel. "We are entering the Ithorian atmosphere."

The instant he looked away, Fandomar bolted for the cockpit.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash warned.

Hoole pointed his blaster at Fandomar's back. But he didn't fire. Tash knew her uncle couldn't shoot anyone in the back.

They were only a few steps behind her, but in those few seconds Fandomar slammed into the controls, tearing at the control stick and smashing the scanner screens with her gloved hands. The ship's nose tilted up and everyone tumbled forward against the console as the cargo carrier went into a steep dive.

Tash and Zak grabbed Fandomar's arms, trying to drag her back from the controls. Hodge staggered up behind them and grabbed the back of Fandomar's spacesuit. Much stronger than

the two Arrandas, he was able to haul Fandomar away from the pilot's seat.

Instantly, Hoole took her place. He pulled back on the control stick, but the ship responded sluggishly. Fandomar had damaged the flight-control system.

On the viewscreen, they could see the nose of the ship plunge out of dark space into the blue sky of Ithor. The green planet rushed up to meet them.

Hoole worked like a machine, running through every option. He tried the thrusters. He worked the repulsor engines. He diverted power from the ship's deflector shields. Nothing worked. The ship barely responded to his commands.

The front of the falling cargo ship turned white-hot. They were falling so fast, they had caught fire.

Tash couldn't even scream——her heart was pounding in her throat. "Seats!" she heard her uncle rasp. For a second she didn't know what he meant. Then she realized she wasn't buckled in to anything. Frantically, she let go of Fandomar, dropped into the nearest chair, and strapped herself into the crashwebbing. Beside her, Zak had done the same thing.

Something bumped against Tash's leg. The speed globe. She picked it up and nervously held the soft globe tight as the ship continued to fall.

Tash told herself they would be all right. Hoole would never give up. He was too calm, too capable to give up. The Shi'ido always found a way out of the most desperate situation.

She watched Hoole work until the last second, hoping he would find some trick that would bring the ship out of its dive. Then her heart sank. Hoole removed his hands from the controls and covered his head. "Brace yourselves," he said. "We're going to crash!"

The cargo ship slammed into the dense forest of Ithor.

Chapter Twelve

Tash felt something soft and warm beneath her. It felt like a mattress.

I'm lying on a bed, she thought. I must be in my cabin. This has all been a dream.

She rolled over onto her other side and felt her face bump against a piece of sharp metal. "Ow!" she muttered drowsily. She opened her eyes.

The sharp metal object was the comlink microphone in her space helmet. A long, jagged crack ran from the top of the helmet's faceplate to the bottom.

Tash sat up with a start, then lay back down with a moan. Her head was ringing. She'd gotten up too fast and made herself dizzy. She waited for the forest around her to stop spinning, then sat up slowly.

The mattress she'd been lying on was a thick bed of moss at the foot of an enormous Bafforr tree. As she rose to her knees, Tash felt bruises forming all over her body. The dizziness had stopped, but her head still ached. She must have taken a blow to the head during the crash. Where her visor was not cracked, it was covered in smears of mossy slime. Unclipping the helmet's seals, she popped it off and tossed the headgear into the brush.

The ship was nowhere in sight, but Tash sniffed the scent of burning ozone and engine exhaust, so she knew it was close by. The speed globe she'd been holding lay a couple of meters away.

"I must have been thrown clear when we hit," she said, mostly to make sure her sore jaw still worked. "If I hadn't landed on this moss, I would have broken my neck."

Sitting back down, Tash kicked off her gray-boots, then unsealed her spacesuit and shook it off. In zero gravity, the suit was weightless, but planetside it was almost too heavy to lift.

Tash tried to stand up, using the Bafforr tree for support.

The minute her hand touched the dark, smooth bark of the tree, an electric tingle shot up her arm and into her brain. A single word echoed loudly in her mind.

Danger!

Instinctively, Tash ducked back down.

At the same moment, she heard a loud rustling in the bushes nearby. Crouched down in the underbrush, she couldn't see a thing, but she heard heavy footsteps clomp past only a few meters from her hiding spot. The warning message had been so clear that she didn't dare look up until the sound of movement faded among the trees.

When the forest had been silent a long time, Tash stood up again. Cautiously, she touched the tree. Nothing happened.

Had the warning been a message from the Bafforr tree? Or the Force? Or both?

Another possibility occurred to Tash. She could still hear a soft ringing in her ears, and she had to admit that the danger signal might have been a trick of her rattled brain. She might have just hidden from a chance at being rescued.

Tash thought about shouting for help. She opened her mouth and filled her lungs with air, but something held her back. Instead she let out a long sigh.

Her sigh was answered by a pain-filled moan from beneath the vines of a nearby blue-flowered shrub.

John Whitman

Tash approached the shrub cautiously. The last thing she needed was to be snared by another of Ithor's hungry plants. But this one seemed harmless enough. She could see a figure lying motionless at its roots. Drawing, nearer, Tash saw that it was Fandomar.

Tash staggered to the Ithorian's side and carefully turned her over. Fandomar's spacesuit was torn, probably by a tree branch as she was thrown clear of the wreck. A nasty cut ran the length of her leg. Her helmet had been cracked in two and nearly torn from her neck. Tash popped it off and threw it aside.

"Fandomar?" she whispered gently. "Fandomar, can you hear me?"

The Ithorian's eyes fluttered open, then closed again. "T—— Tash. Is that you? I can't seem to focus my eyes." She tried to move. "I can't feel my legs, either."

"It's me," Tash replied. "Lie still. We were both thrown clear of the wreckage. You're probably pretty banged up."

A look of panic suddenly crossed Fandomar's face, and her hands clutched blindly at Tash. "Tash, your voice. It doesn't sound like it's coming through the comlink. You're not wearing your helmet?"

"No. Neither are you. We're on Ithor."

"Oh, no, no, no, no," Fandomar moaned. "This is terrible."

Tash blinked. Her head hurt too much to deal with this confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Spore," Fandomar hissed. She said the word as if it were the most terrible thing in the galaxy. "Spore! Spore is free!"

"What do you mean?" Tash asked.

Fandomar started to cry. "It means," she wept, "we're all doomed!"

Chapter Thirteen

"Doomed!" Fandomar whispered again. Her voice was fading.

"What is this Spore?" Tash asked. "Fandomar, you have to tell me!"

But the Ithorian had fainted.

Tash wanted to shake her awake, but she dared not. Fandomar had said she couldn't feel her legs. Her spine might be broken. If Tash moved her, she could make the damage worse.

I'll have to leave her here, Tash decided. Maybe I can get help.

Tash used a jagged piece of metal from Fandomar's helmet to tear strips of cloth from the Ithorian's spacesuit. She used these to bandage Fandomar's leg wound. Then she used the rest of the suit as a blanket to cover the Hammerhead's body. That was the best she could do.

She needed to find Hoole and Zak and make sure they were all right. Then maybe they could find a way to contact the *Tafanda Bay*.

Tash staggered through the forest of Bafforr trees. She had to stop every ten meters or so to catch her breath and let the ringing in her ears quiet down. Every time she rested against a Bafforr's trunk, she waited for that same tingle of energy. But it never came, even when Tash heard loud rustling in the bushes nearby.

John Whitman

Tash braced herself and waited. Something big and heavy-footed pushed its way through the bushes before her.

A tall gray figure stepped into view.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash shouted in pure joy. She threw herself at the Shi'ido, who almost lost his footing. Tash saw a deep cut on his forehead.

"Are you injured?" he asked.

She wasn't sure. "I'm one big bruise and my ears are ringing, but I'm okay. Is your cut bad?"

Hoole touched the gash delicately. "I will live." The stern Shi'ido tried to look as light hearted as his stony face could manage. "It was not my best landing, but all things considered, I would say it wasn't my worst."

Tash grimaced. Hoole never joked. The fact that he was trying to probably meant he felt worse than he looked. "Fandomar is back there in the forest. She's hurt. Do you think the Ithorians saw the crash on their scanners? Will they send a rescue party?"

"I think the answer is yes," said Zak as he slipped between the branches of a sapling tree. Tash couldn't see any cuts or bruises, but her brother's knees were wobbly. He hugged Tash and Hoole as he said, "I saw a ship fly overhead. The crash site's just on the other side of these trees. They'll probably land there."

Zak was right. The three survivors helped each other through the trees and into a clearing. The twisted wreckage of the cargo ship lay piled at the end of a long gouged-out trail it had dug into the ground.

Tash looked back, trying to guess how far she'd walked, and silently thanked the Force. She'd been thrown an incredible distance from the ship. How had she survived? That moss had been soft, but not soft enough to save her from cracking her skull after being launched a hundred meters.

A look of wonder and suspicion crossed her face. She'd been thrown through a grove of Bafforr trees. Had the trees somehow——?

Tash shook her head. Force or no Force, she couldn't believe that the trees had saved her.

Thoughts of a miraculous rescue were driven out as real rescuers appeared. A small medical shuttle dropped down almost at their feet, and four Ithorians carrying medipacs jumped out of the hatch. In seconds they were examining all three survivors, treating Hoole's head wound, and testing Tash to make sure she didn't have a concussion from her fall.

"You've got to help Fandomar," Tash insisted. "She's back there, through the trees."

One of the medics nodded. "Let us make sure you are well first, then you can lead us to her."

"I'm fine!" Tash insisted. But she didn't feel fine. Her ears had stopped ringing, but that sensation had been replaced by another. It was as if a long-range sensor had triggered a warning inside her head.

Something was *wrong*.

"Hey, I could use some help, too!" said a gruff voice.

Hodge stepped out of the shade of a Bafforr tree. He had shed his spacesuit and helmet and walked forward wearing only a miner's jumpsuit and a wide grin. There wasn't a scratch on him.

"Fandomar needs help badly," Tash said. "I left her back there. Her back may be injured, and I think she's delirious. She kept saying something about everyone being doomed. And she mentioned Spore."

All four Ithorians froze. In a frightened whisper, one of them said, "What?"

The fear in their eyes made Tash shiver. "I said she talked about Spore. What does that mean?"

None of the Ithorians answered. Hodge laughed coldly. "I'm afraid that what she means," he said, "is me!"

In the next instant, Hodge turned on the closest person—an Ithorian doctor who had started to examine him. What happened then was beyond Tash's imagination.

John Whitman

Hodge's eyes seemed to explode with thin, dark, vinelike tentacles. More dark vines burst from his open mouth. They lashed out violently, wrapping themselves around the doctor and sinking right into the Ithorian's skin!

Chapter Fourteen

The dark tentacles sank into the Ithorian's skin, burying themselves inside the victim's body. Tash blinked. The tentacles vanished from sight except for a dark tracing of lines, like veins, that showed beneath the skin.

But the Ithorian himself had changed. His body stiffened and he seemed to be waiting for something. "What was that?" Zak asked.

"Spore!" one of the Ithorians gasped in a voice filled with terror.

"I am Spore," said Hodge and the Hammerhead together. Hodge grinned, and he and the Ithorian spoke again. "For years, for centuries, I have been trapped on that lifeless rock. In that airless tomb! At last I have lives to feed on again!"

As one being, Hodge and the Ithorian turned on the other three Hammerheads and opened their mouths. More black tendrils erupted from their mouths and eyes, snaring the three Ithorian doctors. In the midst of her horror, Tash thought the black strings looked like the roots of a fast-growing weed.

Spore had now captured all the Ithorians.

Spore and his victims turned on Hoole. "You are next to join me," Spore said.

John Whitman

A whole forest of tentacles leaped out to capture Hoole. But Hoole had vanished. In the Shi'ido's place appeared a crystal snake. The slithering creature twisted and squirmed, slipping out of the tangle of black tentacles. Quick as a light beam, the crystal snake dodged to one side. Its skin crawled quickly across its body, and Hoole appeared again.

His dodge had carried him to the other side of the clearing. Spore stood between the Arrandas and the Shi'ido.

"Run!" Hoole ordered; then he plunged into the forest.

With no other choice, Zak and Tash fled in the opposite direction.

They ran blindly, jumping over tree roots, ducking under branches, scrambling up small hillocks. The horrible vision of those black vines bursting out of Hodge's mouth made their feet move long after they were exhausted.

Finally, Tash's tired feet tripped her up and she toppled down a gentle, grass-covered slope. Zak fell right behind her, and they came to a stop at the feet of another grove of trees. They rested against the dark trunk of a Bafforr tree.

"Wh-Wh——What...?" Zak panted. He didn't need to finish his sentence.

"Spore," Tash answered. "That's what was trapped on the asteroid."

"And Fandomar let it loose?" her brother guessed.

Tash shook her head, almost too tired to speak. "I don't think it was her. I think it was Hodge. It infected him somehow, took him over. Now he's infecting everyone else."

"Every time those vine-things touch someone, it's like they become part of Spore," Zak said. "It's like they're suddenly all connected."

Tash shuddered. "What do we do?"

"Find Uncle Hoole," her brother suggested.

"Right," she agreed. "Then find a way to warn the *Tafanda Bay*. Whatever this thing is, the Ithorians seem to know about it."

"That's what scares me," Zak said with a shake of his head. "Did you see how scared *they* were?"

"But they trapped it once before," his sister replied. "Maybe they can do it again."

Suddenly, Tash stiffened:

"Tash, what's wrong?"

She didn't answer at first. Sitting with her back to a Bafforr tree, she had felt the warning signal even more powerfully than before.

DANGER!

"They're near," she whispered. "Come on."

Getting to their feet, Zak and Tash slipped behind the tree as quietly as possible, then backed deeper into the grove of Bafforrs. Zak didn't know how Tash knew Spore was close, but he had trusted her feelings in the past. This didn't seem like a good time to start doubting her.

Tash felt her mouth go dry. The feeling of dread continued to pulse through her brain. Danger was in the air around her.

Hoole appeared at the top of the hill down which they'd fallen. He hurried down the slope toward them, his eyes scanning the trees and underbrush.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash whispered when he had gotten within earshot. "Over here!"

The Shi'ido's head whipped around the minute he heard her voice. A few quick strides carried him right up to the tree that hid them.

"Zak, Tash, I am glad I found you," Hoole said.

Tash beckoned him into the shadow of the tree. "Uncle Hoole, you've got to hide. Spore is very near. Come on!"

Hoole shook his head. He smiled and held out his hand. "No, no, Tash. Everything is fine. Join me."

Zak stepped out from behind the tree and toward his uncle's waiting hand. Tash started to follow, then froze.

Join Me.

The way he'd said those words reminded her of something.

John Whitman

As Zak approached his uncle, the Shi'ido opened his mouth in a wide grin.

The black vines snared Zak before he could even scream.

Chapter Fifteen

Tash stumbled backward. The tendrils melted into Zak's body, leaving only black lines visible beneath the skin around his neck. She thought she might be sick.

Hoole and Zak didn't follow as she took a few steps back. Instead, they held up their hands innocently and said at the same time, "Tash, please don't run."

Danger!

The warning pulsed all around her. Tash could feel her heart slam against her ribs, and hear the blood pound in her ears. She knew she should run. But this was Hoole. That was Zak. How could she run?

She tried to keep her voice from shaking as she asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Spore," said Zak and Hoole together. The sound of their voices had the same stereo effect as an Ithorian voice. "I mean you no harm. I simply need... I mean, I want to know you better. To be a part of you. For you to be a part of me."

The phrase chilled Tash's heart. Spore's words reminded her of the feeling she'd gotten before the Bafforr trees, only turned inside out. Instead of feeling the soothing presence of the wise trees trying to connect with her, she felt a dark, evil presence that wanted to control her.

John Whitman

She stared closely at the spiderweb of dark lines hiding beneath Zak's skin and choked back a sob.

"First," she managed to say, "let go of my brother. Let go of Uncle Hoole."

"I will, I promise," Spore replied through Hoole and Zak. "But I need them at the moment. They're going to help me. I promise you, none of you will come to any harm."

"You're already harming them," she said.

"Only because I was desperate," Spore said. "I was trapped for four hundred years. I needed to be free. Once I'm sure I'll be free, then I'll release anyone who doesn't want to be a part of me."

Hoole and Zak took a few steps closer. When they spoke, their voices seemed to change, relaxing into their natural speech. But they still spoke together. "Tash, it's not bad. Won't you join us?"

Tash took another uncertain step back and her foot slipped on the root of the Bafforr tree. Instinctively, she grabbed the tree trunk for balance.

Run!

The message thundered through her mind, too powerful to ignore. Her feet were moving before her brain could form the thought.

She barely saw the black strings slap harmlessly against the tree behind her.

Tash ran for her life. Branches slapped at her face, scratching tears from her eyes. But she wasn't crying from the pain. She was crying out of fear.

How could Zak and Uncle Hoole have been caught? How could she escape Spore all alone?

Alone. She was tired of being alone. Even when she was with her uncle and her brother, she felt different from them. She thought the Force was supposed to make her feel connected to everything, but at the moment she felt like the loneliest, most

STAR WARS: Spore

frightened being in the galaxy. She kept moving, but her legs began to feel heavy. Her lungs started to ache.

Why bother running? she told herself. *What good will it do you? You're running from the only friends you have.*

Tash stopped to catch her breath in a clearing. After a moment, she saw that the bushes all around her were alive with movement. Pulling aside the branches, she saw an Ithorian, one of the medical staff, scanning the forest. It took a few steps forward, looked around, then advanced again. She could hear Spore's other victims all around her, doing the same.

She was caught in the middle of a circle. There was nowhere to run. Soon they'd find her. She looked up. There were Bafforr trees all around her, but the lowest branches were far too high for her to reach. And the bark of the trunk was far too slick for her to try to shimmy up the side.

She glanced down—and saw something familiar. Her spacesuit.

She was back where she started. Not that it would do her any good. There were no weapons in her spacesuit. Just the air tank, the helmet, and...and gravboots.

Tash looked back at the nearest Bafforr tree. There was no way to climb it. But what if she could *walk* up the side of the tree instead?

The rustling in the bushes was very close.

It might work, but she needed time to get the gravboots on her feet.

Tash looked around desperately, until her eyes were caught by a flash of red.

The speed globe.

She had been holding it when the ship crashed. Scooping it up now, she flipped the activation switch and thanked the Force as the speed globe hummed to life.

She could hear someone approaching from her left. It was the Ithorian medic she'd seen earlier.

John Whitman

Tash flicked another switch and the speed globe jumped out of her hands, bouncing onto the forest floor. "Get going!" she rasped, stomping her foot in the globe's direction. The computerized ball bounced away into the underbrush.

Whoever had been approaching from Tash's left suddenly stopped, listening as the speed globe bounced through the bushes before it, too, stopped.

The Ithorian started forward, but as it approached the speed globe's location, the ball shot away, making more noise in the brush.

The Ithorian followed.

While this had been happening, Tash hadn't wasted a moment. As fast as she could, she slipped on her gravboots. As soon as the buckles were snapped, she hurried toward the nearest tree—and nearly fell on her face.

She'd forgotten how heavy the boots were.

Picking herself up, she dragged her feet to the trunk. She lifted one foot and planted it against the smooth black bark. Then, with a silent hope that the Force was with her, she activated the gravboot.

The mini-tractor beam powered up, and she felt her foot clamp down. It worked! Quickly, she hopped up and stuck her other foot onto the trunk.

Then, step by step, Tash walked up the side of the Bafforr tree.

It wasn't easy. Even though her feet stuck to the trunk, gravity still pulled her body toward the ground. She had to use all the muscles in her legs to keep herself from bending backward like a branch too heavy with blumfruit.

Tash had just reached the lowest level of branches when she heard several sets of footsteps burst out of the brush beneath her, converging on the spot where she'd been standing. She froze, trying not to make a sound.

Below her, Zak, Hoole, and the Ithorians had gathered around Hodge. One of the Ithorians held up the speed globe.

Hodge took it, then dropped it on the ground in disgust. None of them spoke. Tash suspected that they didn't need to. They were all thinking with one mind——Spore's.

Tash hoped that the branches around her would hide her from sight, but the Spore-victims didn't even look up. The Bafforr tree would have been impossible to climb.

Tash's legs started to tremble. Inside the gray-boots, her ankles ached.

A moment later, the victims of Spore dispersed, hunting the ground for any sign of their next prey.

Tash forced herself to walk a few feet to the nearest thick branch and crawled onto it. As soon as she had caught her breath, she looked around, trying to figure out her next move. She had to warn the *Tafanda Bay*, or any other herd ship she could find.

First things first, though. She had to get safely away from Spore. But how?

The answer came to Tash so quickly and easily that she almost laughed. She didn't know if she'd figured it out for herself, or if it was the Force, or if it was yet another message from the Bafforr trees. All three seemed to be getting mixed together. Whichever it was, the solution popped into her mind as a single word.

Connections.

Just as the Bafforrs seemed to be connected as one mind, their branches had grown close together, sometimes touching, sometimes intertwining so that at the tops, one tree could hardly be distinguished from the next.

Tash crawled along the branch she was sitting on until she reached the branch of the nearest tree. Carefully, she switched trees, and continued on her way. Sometimes she had to climb down to reach a good branch; sometimes she climbed up. It wasn't easy. Within minutes her hands, arms, and legs were scratched, but slowly, she covered distance.

Wherever Spore thought she was, that wasn't where she was going to be soon. Tash allowed herself a momentary smile.

John Whitman

Then the smile vanished. The branch she had just climbed onto suddenly wrapped itself around her body and pulled her down toward the ground. More branches snared her arms and legs.

She had crawled into the vines of a vesuvague tree.

Chapter Sixteen

Tash struggled, but she knew it was no use. The tree was too strong. It had pulled her down from the Bafforr branches and now held her near its own trunk, a meter or two above the ground. Every time she struggled, the vesuvague squeezed a little tighter.

Either it would crush her, or it would keep squeezing until she couldn't move. Then it would wait for her to die of thirst.

She gave one final struggle. The tree fought back, wrapping a thin vine around her face. Her mouth was covered. It was getting hard to breathe, and her vision started to blur. Soon another vine would cover her eyes, and she'd be blind and helpless.

At least, she thought, I won't be caught by Spore.

Just before the last vine fell into place, she saw a figure walk toward her. Through her bleary eyes, she could just make out the hammerheaded silhouette of an Ithorian. It reached out to touch her.

Everything went black.

Tash opened her eyes with a start.

John Whitman

Strong but gentle hands held her down, and a soothing voice said, "You are safe."

Tash blinked to clear her eyes. She was lying in a large cave. A small campfire crackled nearby. Over it, someone had placed a simple grill and a stone bowl full of bubbling liquid. The smoke from the fire rose up, mixing with the scent of the liquid to fill the cave with a pleasant odor.

Tash sat up slowly and realized she was sitting next to Fandomar. Relief, warmer than the fire, flooded through her. "I'm glad you're all right!"

Fandomar nodded. "The feeling in my legs returned soon after you left. I guessed where you were going, and I knew the danger, so I decided not to wait for you."

"How did you find me?" Tash asked.

Fandomar handed her a cup of the steaming liquid. It tasted like vegetables. "The Bafforr trees told me," she said simply. "After I found you, I brought you here."

Fandomar's hand swept across the cave. The darkness was lit only by fire. In the gloom, Tash saw Ithorians moving about. Most wore simple clothes, or no clothes at all.

"This is the home for some of those who've felt the call of the Mother Forest," Fandomar explained. "As a High Priest, my husband knew they were here, and so did I. This was the only place I could think of."

"We're safe then?" Tash asked.

"For the moment," Fandomar said. "Those who hear the call of the Mother Forest are shy and avoid contact with strangers. They are uncomfortable being near us even now, and permit it only because my husband was a High Priest. They will avoid anyone else they see, and so they are not likely to be captured by Spore." Fandomar's eyes darkened. "But Spore must be stopped. Eventually, it will absorb every being on this planet. No place will be safe."

Tash thought of Hoole and Zak. "What is Spore?"

Fandomar sighed, then began, "The story is sad, both for my people and for me. We Ithorians are more than just gardeners. We have learned to create new forms of plant life by splicing the genes of one plant with those of another. Usually, we do this to make stronger, healthier versions of a plant."

"Using DNA," Tash said.

"Exactly." Fandomar continued, "About four hundred years ago, my people took their experiments too far. Using the genes of the vesuvague tree and the Bafforrs, along with some other things, they created a new form of life. Like the vesuvague, this creation snared its victims in its tentacle like vines. It also had a group mind like the Bafforr trees. However, unlike the wise Bafforrs, its mind was evil."

"Why?" Tash asked.

Fandomar raised her hands in that shrug like motion. "Who can say? Perhaps it was driven mad by the process that created it. I don't know. But whatever the reason, a change occurred. The Bafforrs have a peaceful desire to let their collective mind grow. In Spore, this desire became a hunger. Spore exists to snare the minds of everyone it meets and bring them under its control."

"How many beings," Tash said, almost afraid to ask, "could Spore control?"

"Thousands," Fandomar replied in the gloom. "Maybe millions."

Tash's heart skipped a beat. She imagined whole worlds under the control of Spore's dark tentacles. When she spoke, her voice shook. "How did the Ithorians stop it?"

"With luck," Fandomar replied. "And the help of the Jedi. There were still Jedi Knights four hundred years ago. Even so, it wasn't easy. It took almost a hundred years to rid Ithor of the Spore creature."

"Do you know how they did it?"

"No. There were records, but they were erased by the Empire."

John Whitman

Tash nodded grimly. That made sense. When the Emperor took power, he had hunted down and killed the Jedi Knights. Then he had erased almost every reference to the Jedi Knights from libraries across the galaxy.

By wiping out the record of the Jedi work on Ithor, the Empire might have erased the means of stopping Spore.

"I do know this," Fandomar said. "Spore was sealed up in the asteroid tomb for a reason. In the vacuum of space, it becomes dormant and powerless."

"Why didn't they just kill it?" Tash asked.

Fandomar frowned. "The Law of Life applies to all creatures. We created Spore. Did that give us a right to kill it? Besides, my people thought the solution would work. Spore was helpless in the asteroid tomb. It must have an oxygen atmosphere and a host to occupy."

"You mean like Hodge," Tash said. She guessed the rest. "Hodge and his men thought there was treasure down there. They wanted to keep it for themselves. When Jerec arrived, Hodge must have thought his only chance was to stall the Imperials and raid the tomb himself. He must have made up the story about the space slugs' feeding time, and then he and one of his men opened the tomb."

Fandomar nodded. "In its dormant form, Spore would have looked like a small hard shell, maybe even a valuable stone. Somehow, Spore awakened and was able to infect Hodge before he left the tomb."

"But why did Hodge kill his partner?" Tash asked. "Why not just infect him?"

"They were still in space," Fandomar explained. "Spore cannot infect people across the vacuum of space. Hodge undoubtedly put the Spore creature near his own skin, but once Spore had infected him, it could not get at the other miner. I think that the other miner saw Hodge being infected. Since Spore couldn't reach out with its tentacles to control the other miner, it

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used Hodge's body and a vibroblade to kill the miner and keep him quiet."

Tash's eyes lit up. "And you were the one who blew up the mining station."

Fandomar nodded. "I had to stop Spore, but I didn't know at the time who was infected. I couldn't allow the creature into an oxygen atmosphere, so I destroyed the station's controls. Then I lied about the environmental controls aboard my ship to make sure everyone kept their spacesuits on. It bought me some time."

The heavy tone in Fandomar's voice caught Tash's attention. "Why have you gotten so involved in this?"

"Because," Fandomar said, "it is all my fault!"

Chapter Seventeen

"What do you mean it's your fault?" Tash asked.

The shadows of the cave seemed to wrap around Fandomar as she answered. "The Ithorians have kept Spore a secret for four hundred years. We knew that someone might be tempted to open the tomb. Only the High Priests knew of the tomb's location."

Fandomar sighed, then continued. "I learned about its location accidentally, from my husband, who was a High Priest. The Imperial officer who forced my husband to reveal his secrets was a terrible, violent man. He would have killed my husband and wiped out an entire forest of Bafforr trees without thinking. I was afraid he would not be satisfied with the secrets my husband gave him"——Fandomar shuddered——"so I told him about Spore!"

Tash gently put her hand over Fandomar's. She had guessed the rest. "You said you volunteered to make the shuttle run to the mining station. Was that so you could keep an eye on the tomb?"

Fandomar nodded. "I had to make sure no one opened it, especially after the miners discovered the slug hole. I thought I could manage, until the Imperials arrived."

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Tash wondered how Jerec had learned about Spore. She shrugged. The Empire was evil and corrupt. Officers traded information to get more power. Jerec had probably bought or stolen the secret of Spore from someone, then kept it for himself. It didn't matter.

Tash had more important things to worry about. She stood up. She had been sipping Fandomar's broth as they talked, and she felt better. Fandomar followed her as they walked toward the front of the cave. The planet-dwelling Ithorians shied away as they passed.

"Fandomar, isn't there any way to stop Spore and save the others? Or at least to warn the herd ships?"

The Ithorian shook her head. "There are no communication devices here," she said, pointing out the primitive lifestyle of the Ithorians around them. "As for stopping Spore, I have a theory. Hodge is the first person infected. That makes him the primary host, or the main body. If he is forced into space, I think Spore will go dormant and lose his power over the others."

They reached the front of the cave. They were on a mountainside. Below them, the Ithorian forest stretched on forever. It was an inspiring view, but Tash's shoulders slumped. "We might as well just wish it away. I doubt Hodge will accidentally step out of an airlock."

Fandomar agreed. "There is only one thing in our favor at the moment. When Spore and his victims were looking for you, I sabotaged the medical craft with this." She held up a blaster. "I found it near the wreckage of the cargo ship."

Tash guessed that it was probably the same blaster Hoole had been holding just before the cargo ship started its fall.

"I am unfamiliar with weapons," Fandomar admitted, "but I set it on its highest strength and fired into the ship's engines. They will not function. Since no other Ithorians come down here, Spore will be unable to find any more victims. He still controls the crew of the medical shuttle, your brother, and your

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uncle, but at least he has been neutralized. There is no way for Spore to leave the surface of the planet now."

But Fandomar spoke too soon. Even as the words left her mouth, an Imperial shuttle streaked over their heads and shot toward the forest floor.

Tash and Fandomar hurried through the forest as quickly and silently as possible. Around them, Tash knew, were half a dozen of the shy, planet-dwelling Ithorians. But they moved so stealthily that she never saw or heard them.

Fandomar had persuaded the Ithorians to help with a desperate plan. They knew that Spore would try to steal the next ship that came by, Imperial or not. Fandomar's native friends would cause a distraction, then vanish into the forest. Meanwhile, Tash and Fandomar would sneak on board and steal the ship, or at least damage it so that Spore could not fly to a more populated area.

They reached the clearing where the Imperial shuttle had landed, and crept closer. From behind a Bafforr tree, Tash saw that the shuttle's ramp was lowered. At the foot of the ramp stood Jerec himself. Facing him stood Spore, in Hodge's body, with his victims crowding behind him. Zak and Hoole were among them.

Silently, Tash cursed herself for not taking the blaster from Fandomar. She had a clean shot at Spore. But she doubted that killing one of Spore's victims would kill Spore itself. Besides, she had to admit, she wasn't sure she could bring herself to shoot someone in cold blood.

"You were brave to come alone," Spore said in a half dozen voices.

Jerec sneered. "I am not about to feed you any more victims, Spore."

Spore laughed. The sight of her brother and uncle laughing with the others made Tash wince. "So you think you know what I am," said Spore. "Let me give you a closer look!"

Spore and all his servants opened their eyes and mouths. A forest of vinelike tentacles shot toward the dark-cloaked Imperial.

Jerec raised one hand. Tash felt a ripple of dark-side power flow from his fingertips. When Spore's tentacles met the dark-side energy, they withered and died in midair.

Jerec snorted. "Your power is hardly a match for the dark side of the Force." He cast an evil grin at Spore. "However, you have your uses."

"If you are so powerful," Spore said, "what do you want with me?"

Jerec smoothed the band of black cloth that covered his eyes. "Your ability to control thousands of other beings is of use to me. I do not mean to be the Emperor's servant forever. I have plans of my own, and to achieve my plans I need an army. Unfortunately, most Imperial soldiers are loyal to the Emperor himself. I want you to take control of the Imperial army and navy, so that, through you, the soldiers will follow my commands."

"And you become the new Emperor," Spore guessed.

"Exactly," Jerec agreed.

Spore growled. "Why should I help you?"

Jerec smiled. He looked relaxed, but Tash could still feel the dark-side energy pulsing around him like a shield.

"I will give you a ship to take you off this planet."

Spore scoffed. "I will have that anyway, soon enough. Before long all the herd ships will be part of me, and I will use them to spread across the galaxy."

"Tedious work. Slow work," Jerec said. "Imagine how much faster it would be if you had your own Star Destroyer."

Spore seemed intrigued. He listened as Jerec explained. "My Star Destroyer, the *Vengeance*, is orbiting overhead. Its crew

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obeys my orders, but only because I serve the Emperor. I want them to obey me, not the Emperor. Do you understand?"

Spore nodded.

"Enslave them. Guarantee that they will do whatever I ask. Do that, and I will give you whole worlds to conquer. But we must leave immediately."

There was a pause. All of Spore's bodies——Hodge, Zak, Hoole, and the four Ithorians——stood absolutely still while the monster was deep in thought.

Then all the voices said at once, "Agreed."

Fandomar's friends chose that moment for their distraction. A shadowy figure flitted through the edge of the clearing. Then another, and another. Spore started toward them.

"Leave them!" Jerec ordered, following after. "Get aboard the shuttle. There's no time."

"No!" Spore shouted. "They're mine! They will join me."

"Remember——the ship! The entire crew! They are yours!" Jerec said.

Spore hesitated for a split second, then divided himself in two. The four captured Ithorians ran into the forest. Hodge, Zak, and Hoole went onto Jerec's shuttle. Spore could control them all, from anywhere.

None of them had noticed, during the distraction, two figures scrambling aboard the empty shuttle.

Tash and Fandomar had barely crammed themselves into a small storage bay in the back of the shuttle before the ship lifted off.

Only after the shuttle had left the planet did Tash have time to consider what in the galaxy she was doing. She had just sneaked on board an Imperial shuttle that carried a master of the dark side of the Force and an evil parasite called Spore.

Chapter Eighteen

For several tense minutes, neither Tash nor Fandomar spoke. Tash listened with her ears—and with her mind. She guessed that Jerec was still concentrating on shielding himself from Spore. That, plus the attention required to fly his own ship, should keep the dark-sider from sensing their presence.

As for anyone hearing them, they were back near the thruster ports. The sound of the ship's engines would mask their conversation.

"What now?" Fandomar whispered.

"I have a plan," Tash said, which was half true. "I think we can stop the Star Destroyer and save Zak and Hoole. But it means relying on something I'm not sure I can do. And I need your help."

Fandomar stated firmly, "I cannot break the Law of Life."

Tash tried to smile. "You'll just have to bend it a little."

The shuttle glided quickly toward the massive Star Destroyer orbiting Ithor and slid smoothly into the docking bay. Tash and Fandomar weren't sure what happened next. They could hear very little. But from the few sounds that trickled into their hiding

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spot, they could guess. Spore had branched out and was infecting everyone in the docking bay. In a matter of minutes, he had spread from a handful of victims to hundreds.

With painfully slow, quiet movements, Tash slipped out of the storage bin and tiptoed toward the front of the shuttle. She crawled on her stomach until she reached the hatch, and peeked outside.

The docking bay of the Star Destroyer was huge. It should have been filled with noise.

This one was quiet as a tomb.

Tash guessed that all the infected crewmen were now moving around the ship, infecting even more Imperials.

Only two figures were left standing alone on the main deck. When she saw them, Tash almost cried tears of joy. It was Zak and Hoole.

Tash had hoped they would be left behind. She remembered that Spore had captured Zak, and nearly captured her, by sending someone familiar to lure them in. She had guessed that Spore would use the same strategy on the crew of the Star Destroyer. Since Hoole and Zak were outsiders, they would only raise suspicion, so Spore had left them behind.

Now all Tash had to do was save them.

Tash walked up to her uncle and brother as calmly as if they were aboard their own ship. They were standing as still as statues, with their backs to the shuttle. Summoning up all the courage she could manage, she said, "Hi, guys."

Zak and Hoole whirled around as one. "Tash," Spore said through their mouths. "I want you to join me. Now."

"Wait!" Tash said. She was speaking with her mouth, but she was focusing with her mind. She reached out with the Force. Once before she had used the Force to reach into someone's mind. If she could do it again...

Hoole and Zak opened their mouths and eyes wide to release the deadly spore tendrils. Then they closed them.

"Zak, Uncle Hoole, it's me, Tash," said Tash, still reaching out with the Force. She tried to imagine the connection between them, a power stronger than Spore.

Hoole blinked.

Zak cocked his head in confusion.

Tash could feel the Force flowing back and forth—from Tash to Hoole, from Zak to Tash. They were connected. It was working!

Then Spore seemed to strengthen his hold. Tash felt herself losing them. The Force connection wasn't broken (it could *never* be broken, she realized), but she didn't know how to use it. She didn't have the skill.

Spore, meanwhile, had everything he needed to fight back. The confused look left Zak's face. He and Hoole belonged to Spore once again.

Dark tentacles burst from their eyes. Vines flew from their mouths.

At the last second, Tash imagined the Force rising up around her like a wall. She didn't know if it was the best thing to do. She didn't even know if it was the right thing to do. All she knew was that she loved her brother and her uncle, and to save them she had to defend herself.

The dark vines stopped in midair and fell to the floor in withered strings.

Zak and Hoole froze for a moment. Tash's knees nearly gave out. Using the Force had taken something out of her. She knew she didn't have the strength to defend herself again.

Fortunately, she didn't have to. In the moment Hoole and Zak hesitated, Fandomar rose up behind them. She aimed the blaster she had carried and fired two quick blasts. Hoole and Zak crumpled to the floor.

Fandomar paused for the briefest instant. She bent down to examine her two victims. Tash saw her relax when she confirmed that they were only stunned. She sighed, "Bent, but not broken."

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"Spacesuits and Starflies," Tash said. "And hurry. Spore will know everything that's happened here."

As if to confirm her words, intruder alarms sounded throughout the ship.

The Starflies were easy to find——Jerec and his men had used them not long before. A spacesuit that fit Fandomar took a little longer. Most Imperials were humans, and there was almost no need for alien-sized uniforms. Tash checked three lockers before she found one that came close. The Ithorian's hammerhead was nearly crushed against the sides of the oversized helmet. Her wide-set eyes were so jammed that she could hardly see.

"Is that comfortable enough?" Tash asked.

"I will be less comfortable as one of Spore's victims," Fandomar replied.

The alarms had been going off for over a minute. Spore's entire crew of new slaves would be there any second.

Fandomar and Tash frantically slid Zak and Hoole into spacesuits. Tash grabbed a length of cable she'd found in one of the lockers and tied their hands together.

"There's cargo space behind the Starfly seats," she told Fandomar.

At the far end of the docking bay, a door slid open. A squad of stormtroopers burst in. Their weapons were drawn, but they did not fire.

They belonged to Spore. And they wanted Tash to join them.

"Your uncle will not fit," Fandomar said.

"Make him fit!" Tash screeched. She helped the Ithorian slip the large Shi'do into the cargo space of Fandomar's vessel, folding his tied hands quickly across his chest.

Tash then jumped into her own Starfly, with Zak's unconscious form crammed in behind her. The stormtroopers were only a dozen yards away. As Tash lifted off in the Starfly, the docking bay's enormous doors started to close. But Spore

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had moved too slowly. The quick Starflies slipped easily through the opening.

As the two tiny ships darted away from the giant Star Destroyer, Tash heard Fandomar's voice over the intercom. "We can't outrun an Imperial Star Destroyer in these!"

Tash replied, "No, but we can outfly it!"

She pointed her ship toward the asteroid field and hit the accelerator.

Chapter Nineteen

Tash banked hard as an asteroid came out of nowhere and nearly crumpled the front end of her Starfly.

She checked her scanner, hoping the Vengeance had fallen back.

It had gained.

Spore was following them.

Tash wasn't sure whether Spore would come after them. After all, it had an entire Star Destroyer at its disposal——why chase down a few more victims? She had gambled on something Fandomar had told her, that Spore was driven to infect *every* being it met. The creature itself had confirmed that when it pursued the Ithorians in the forest.

Spore wanted everyone to join it.

As the two Starflies flicked in and out among the asteroids, the Vengeance surged forward. Its pointed front end sliced into the asteroid field like a knife. Power turbolasers blasted any space rocks that came close. The asteroids that weren't destroyed bounced off the Destroyer's deflector shields.

So far, so good, Tash thought. She took a few deep breaths, trying to regain the awareness of the Force she'd had a few minutes before.

"That won't work, you know," Spore whispered in her ear.

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Tash nearly jumped out of her skin. Zak was awake. He had spoken through the comlink in his helmet, and hers had picked it up.

Tash tried to calm her racing heart. The Starfly didn't provide any atmosphere of its own, she reminded herself. The inside of the little ship was just like the vacuum of space. Spore couldn't infect her. And since Zak was tied up, he didn't pose much of a threat, either.

"I'm going to warn the Empire," Tash threatened. "You'll be hunted down and destroyed before you can infect one more person."

"You'll never get the chance," Spore said in Zak's voice. Tash was surprised at how *evil* her brother could sound. "You will join me. You'll be a part of me. Didn't you want to become one with the Force? Isn't that what you told me?"

"I told Zak!" Tash snapped.

She swerved just in time to avoid another asteroid. Spore was trying to distract her. She couldn't listen.

Spore continued, "The Force is nothing. If it ever existed, it belonged to Jedi who died years ago. I can offer you something more. Join me, and you will join thousands, millions of others." Spore laughed. "You are just what I've been waiting for. Jerec thinks I'm mad for chasing you down, but *I* control the crewmen, so *I* control the ship. He's right here with me, on the bridge of the Star Destroyer."

For an instant, Tash let herself be impressed by Spore's power. He could be in many places at once. He was with Tash in the Starfly, and he was on board the Imperial ship. It was frightening.

Spore continued. "Jerec doesn't know of your Force sensitivity. But I do. Should I tell him?" the creature taunted. "Or should I keep it to myself? You know, you're not strong enough to stop me. Not nearly strong enough. Once you're under my control, I'll make you my primary host. I will be you."

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Tash saw what she was looking for. A cluster of moon-sized asteroids spackled with cavernous holes. She aimed for the middle of the cluster.

"You'll have to catch me first," she said through clenched teeth.

Again, Spore laughed. "The asteroid field won't stop me. The Vengeance is powerful enough to survive the collisions. The asteroids are nothing."

Tash plunged into the enormous cluster of asteroids, her Starfly buzzing them like a swamp midge darting around a herd of nerfs.

Behind it, the Star Destroyer continued cutting a path, whole batteries of turbolasers firing at once. Dozens of asteroids were blasted into space dust.

Waves of rubble showered the large asteroids, causing vibrations in the rock.

Inside the asteroids, creatures stirred.

The Star Destroyer entered the cluster.

Spore grinned. "I have you now."

Tash felt a tractor beam lock onto her tiny Starfly. The ship froze instantly in place. She was caught.

At the same time, something huge and gray launched itself like a missile from a cavern. The space slug had never before encountered anything its own size, and it lunged forward eagerly.

The giant worm struck, battering the Vengeance before it bounced off the Star Destroyer's shields.

"You see?" Spore said through Zak's mouth. "My ship can withstand——"

Zak's mouth stopped working.

Another space slug had attacked from another angle. The Star Destroyer shook.

"You were saying?" Tash said.

The tractor beam dropped off. Tash hit the accelerator and slipped out of the asteroid cluster.

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Behind her, the Vengeance tried to change course, but it was attacked again and again. The two space slugs were too stubborn, or too stupid, to give up. And Tash doubted that Spore knew how to command the Star Destroyer. It moved sluggishly, slowly. The ship had been hit a dozen times before it managed to turn around.

By that time, its shields were failing, and with its shields gone, the Star Destroyer could not fend off the asteroids. And at nearly two kilometers long, it was a big target. Space rocks slammed into its hull at a hundred different points. Plumes of fire started lifting from its main deck. A moment later, the bridge exploded.

Tash saw a gaping hole open up the side of the star-ship. As she reached the edge of the asteroid field, she imagined the vacuum of space rushing in to find Spore.

Epilogue

"So I have an evil laugh, huh?" Zak asked. He gave a wicked-sounding chuckle.

"Not even close," Tash replied.

They were aboard the *Tafanda Bay*, lounging in one of the floating city's many parks. All of them seemed relieved except Fandomar, who sat with her eyes downcast and muttering to herself in sorrowful tones.

Her theory had been correct. When the hole had opened up in the side of the Star Destroyer, the air inside had escaped, just as it had at the mining facility. Spore and his minions had been unable to seal the damage, and soon the entire ship had been exposed to airless space.

Spore had been neutralized.

Soon after the Vengeance had lost power and started drifting, Zak had fainted. When he came to his senses a few hours later, he had no memory of the time of his infection. Neither he nor Hoole had asked for details, which was fine with Tash. She still turned pale at the thought of the weird tentacles hurtling from their mouths and eyes. She didn't need to describe it.

Hoole walked up to them. "The Shroud is refueled," their uncle said. "It's time to go."

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Tash put her hand on Fandomar's shoulder. "Will you be all right?"

Fandomar sighed. "I do not know. I have committed a crime far worse than my husband's," she said. "He gave up our secret technology to save the Bafforr trees. I betrayed the Law of Life and helped destroy all those people on the Star Destroyer."

"But you probably saved countless lives by doing so," Hoole replied.

"Besides," Tash argued, "~~you~~ didn't do anything to those Imperials. You were only following me."

Fandomar blinked. "I'm afraid my conscience may not be as forgiving as you are."

Tash got to her feet. "Please don't feel bad, Fandomar. You're a hero. I mean, Spore is dead, right?" she asked. "If Zak and Uncle Hoole and those four Ithorians have all returned to normal, Spore must have died."

Fandomar nodded. "I hope so."

On the outskirts of the asteroid field, Imperial salvage crews sorted through the wreckage of the Vengeance that floated around in space. There wasn't much left to pick up, but they'd been ordered to scan the garbage with extra-fine sensors. The order had come from Jerec himself, who had survived the wreck by escaping aboard a Starfly moments before destruction.

The salvage crews grumbled, and swept the asteroid field again. Hardly anything showed up on their scopes.

So far, a few small objects had escaped their attention. If they kept looking they might find, drifting in the debris, a few undamaged TIE fighters, the ship's computer core with all its Imperial secrets intact, and, nearby, a human body and a dark object the size of a human fist. It looked like a large seed.

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The corpse was nothing important——just the body of someone named Hodge, who had once been chief partner of a mining station. He had died when the Star Destroyer lost its air.

Beside it, the small fist-sized object floated.

And waited. Eventually, someone would find it. Someone would pick it up...

Book Ten
The Doomsday Ship

Prologue

The door slid open.

A man stepped into a room that bristled with electronic equipment.

Working quietly and quickly, he set a large portable computer down on a control console, then pulled a connection wire from his pocket.

His hands worked almost as swiftly and efficiently as the computers that surrounded him.

The man plugged one end of his wire into the portable computer and the other end into the computer system.

Taking a deep breath, he pressed a button on the control pad. At this command, ten trillion bits of information zipped from one computer into the other at nearly the speed of light. It would take ten thousand beings, studying all their lives, to memorize all the information stored in the computer program he was downloading.

The transfer was complete in seconds.

The man disconnected the portable computer. Then he removed a tiny comlink from his pocket. He turned it on and whispered to himself: "Doomsday has begun."

Chapter One

Zak and Tash Arranda were playing hologames in the lounge of their starship, the *Shroud*, when it suddenly dropped out of hyperspace.

Zak felt the ship's hyperdrive stop and he glanced out a small viewport in time to see that they were hurtling toward a huge star cruiser. It was a thousand times larger than the *Shroud*—so big that it blotted out the stars.

"We're gonna crash!" he shouted to his sister. Startled, she braced against her chair.

But there was no collision. The *Shroud* slowed down and glided up alongside the giant ship. Tash straightened her neat single blond braid. "Thanks a lot, Zak," she said. "Next time I feel like having a heart spasm, I'll know who to ask."

Zak shrugged. "Well, it looked like we were going to crash."

"Not with Uncle Hoole piloting. Let's go to the cockpit."

By the time Zak and Tash reached the *Shroud's* control room, the ship had come to a complete stop. Their uncle Hoole was sitting in the pilot's seat and speaking into a comm unit. "*Shroud* standing by, waiting for docking orders."

Zak beat his thirteen-year-old sister to the copilot's seat by a half- step (just because she was a year older didn't mean she was

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any faster!) and dropped down into it. "What's going on, Uncle Hoole? Is the ship okay?"

"Whose cruiser is that?" Tash added.

Hoole turned his stern gray face to them. "There is nothing wrong with the ship," he replied in his usual flat-toned voice. "But to get to Dantooine we must pass through some heavily populated Imperial sectors. I saw this cruise ship on the sensors and it gave me an idea."

The two Arrandas and their uncle needed to avoid the Empire at all costs. And the planet Dantooine was about as far from the Empire as they could get. A few months before, they had stumbled upon an Imperial experiment to create a new, living superweapon. They'd helped destroy the experiment but had drawn the attention of the Emperor's right-hand man, the Dark Lord known as Darth Vader. Now they were wanted for crimes against the Empire, and they were looking for a safe place to hide.

Tash and Zak felt as though they'd been on the run forever. Almost a year earlier, their parents and all their friends had been killed when the Empire destroyed their home planet, Alderaan. Now Hoole was their guardian. From a distance, you might believe they were part of the same family, but up close, even a stranger could see that Hoole wasn't a blood relation. In fact, he wasn't even the same species. Zak and Tash were human, and Hoole was a Shi'ido. He was taller than most humans and his skin was a light gray. But the most important difference between humans and Uncle Hoole was the Shi'ido's ability to change shape. Hoole could morph into any living creature in the galaxy.

"That is the luxury cruiser *Star of empire*," Hoole told his nephew and niece. "I just booked rooms for a two-week trip."

Tash's eyes lit up. "For us? Great!"

But Zak wasn't nearly as excited. He looked out the *Shroud's* main viewport and got his first good look at the star cruiser. It was shaped like an egg nearly two kilometers long and laser-painted a brilliant blue. Forty rows of portholes ran the length of

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the ship, with light beaming from every one of them. Lights also glowed on the bridge high at the top of the ship. The vessel seemed to be moving slowly, like a giant teardrop trickling through space.

"Yeah, great," Zak grumbled. "Another adventure."

Chapter Two

"Welcome aboard the cruise ship *Star of empire*. My name is M-4D0. You may call me Fourdee. May I help you?"

The protocol droid that had spoken stepped forward, its servos whirring as its golden arms and legs shuffled across the deck of the cruiser.

"Urn, we're just waiting for our uncle," Zak replied. "He's registering the ship with the deck officer."

"I see," the droid said. "I am a porter droid, programmed to assist you while you are on board. I shall wait." M-4D0 froze in place, humming pleasantly.

"It can't be that luxurious a cruise ship," Tash chuckled, "if all they send to greet us is a droid."

"No problem for me," Zak said darkly. "I'd rather deal with a droid than some other being any day."

Tash shook her head. "What's draining your power cells, Zak? We're on a cruise ship! We can actually relax for once. Everyone who works here is paid to give us anything we want!"

"That's the problem," Zak grumbled. "We'll have to deal with everyone here. I was kind of looking forward to a nice long trip on the *Shroud*—*alone*."

"Well," Tash said, "if you want to avoid other beings, you'd better find a new galaxy. This one's got billions."

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Zak nodded vigorously. "Yeah, and every time we meet one, something bad happens. What about Sh'shak on S'krrr? We met him and were almost eaten alive by the bugs in his garden. And our friend Fandomar from the planet Ithor——after we met her, I became a Spore zombie! And do I have to remind you about that little brain surgery you had done on Tatooine?" Zak was almost shouting now. "And that's just in the last couple of months."

He knew his sister couldn't argue. Their entire time with Hoole had been a string of adventures. "But that's exactly why I'm looking forward to this trip," Tash replied. "This isn't some Imperial plot, Zak. It's just a cruise ship."

"But it's still full of people," Zak insisted. "And other beings are what keep getting us into trouble, whether they mean to or not. All in all, I'd rather deal with machines like M-4D0 here."

"Thanks a lot," the droid intoned.

"No offense," Zak added.

"I don't think we will have much to worry about here, Zak," Hoole said, gliding gracefully up behind them.

"This star cruiser is as ordinary a place as you will find in all the galaxy. We will be safe."

Twenty-four hours later, Zak still hadn't seen any more of the cruise ship than the docking bay, the turbolift, and his cabin. He'd spent all of the previous day and night dismantling the microprocessors in his cabin computer. He had always liked machines——everything from the reheating units in his parents' kitchen to a starship's sublight engine. Lately, he'd become interested in computers and wanted to find out more about how they worked.

He stared at the jumble of wires, connectors, and microchips spread out across his cabin table. "Now all I have to do is figure out how to put it back together."

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His cabin door slid open and Tash walked in, wearing a poncho made of fluffy white material. She was holding a portable heating unit in her hand, using it to dry her wet hair.

"Zak, you should see the swimming pool on this deck!" she said. "It's as big as B'jorring Pond back home!"

"No thanks," Zak said.

"Come on, Zak," Tash pleaded. "You're missing all the fun. There's a rec room full of hologames, gym rooms, a big park they call the Atrium——there's even a menagerie!"

"A what?" Zak asked.

"A menagerie. A zoo," Tash explained.

"I'll bet there's a library, too," Zak guessed, glancing at his sister, "because I don't think even you knew that word yesterday."

Tash's eyes lit up. "There's a great library. In fact, I found something there you wouldn't believe." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I was skimming through the ship's computer library and I found an article on the Jedi Knights."

Zak stopped working. "I thought the Emperor had erased all mention of the Jedi Knights."

Tash nodded. The Jedi Knights had defended the galaxy and fought for justice for thousands of years, using a mysterious power called the Force. But when the evil Emperor rose to power, he and Darth Vader hunted down and killed the Jedi Knights. Once all the Jedi had been destroyed, the Emperor ordered all mention of them to be erased from every computer in the galaxy.

"Well, he tried," his sister replied. "But it's a big galaxy and they must have missed this one. This article was listed under another subject. I almost didn't see it." She lowered her voice even more. "If the Emperor knew it was here, he'd probably destroy the whole ship to get it."

"I knew it!" Zak said. "We're here one day and you're already involved in more trouble! Next thing you know some evil Jedi is

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going to show up and try to wipe all the memories from your brain and we'll have to save you."

Tash laughed. "Would you relax? I haven't told anyone about the article. You know why?" She lowered her voice again. "It's about a Jedi philosophy called 'action through inaction.' The whole idea is that sometimes, when your instinct is to charge right into a problem, the real solution is to sit back, relax, and be patient. Let the problem solve itself."

"You mean getting somewhere by doing nothing?"

"Exactly."

"Good," Zak said, "because that's what I plan on doing."

Tash shook her head. "Oh no you don't. I wouldn't be doing my job as a big sister if I didn't make you leave your cabin once in a while. Hey, Fourdee!"

As soon as she called out, the cabin door slid open and the golden droid they'd met the previous day stepped inside. "Everything is ready, young lady."

Zak eyed his sister. "What are you up to?"

Tash shrugged. "I want you to see more of the ship. You want to work on computers. I thought I'd find a way to make us both happy."

Thirty minutes later Zak was standing in a turbolift, just outside the most amazing room he'd ever seen. The walls were lined with computer banks. There were scanner screens everywhere. Some of them displayed images of places inside the ship, and others gave details of objects light-years away. Wires, cables, and machines were everywhere. Tash would have hated it—which is why she'd gone back for another swim. But for Zak, who loved technology, it was a dream come true.

"Welcome to the control center of the *Star of empire*," Fourdee said. "If the ship were a living creature, this room would be its brain."

"Are you... are you sure we're allowed in here?" Zak asked.

John Whitman

"Absolutely," the droid replied. "Your sister informed me of your interest, and I requested a visitor's permit from Captain Hajj."

Fourdee led Zak to the center of the room. There, separated from all the other equipment, stood a single computer. It was set in a gleaming black case almost as tall as Zak and as wide as a landspeeder. Lights flashed along its surface, and it hummed quietly.

Near the computer sat the only technician in the room. He was human, with dark, stringy hair and dark circles beneath his eyes.

"Crewman Malik," the droid said. "This is your scheduled visitor. His name is Zak."

Malik looked at Zak as if he were a Kowakian monkey-lizard. "Go away."

Fourdee chimed in, "I'm afraid the captain has issued Zak a pass. You are to be his guide."

Malik glared at Fourdee. "You go away, too."

"Well, I can see you two will get along just fine," Fourdee hummed. "I'll be on my way."

The droid shuffled back into the waiting turbolift and zoomed away.

Zak watched the technician, who ignored Zak as he studied the readouts on the surface of the big computer. Zak looked around, trying to make sense of the complex machines. Something scuttled across the floor. It was a tiny droid, walking on several metal legs and waving one large pincer in the air. The droid scurried toward a vent, then vanished. Zak realized it was a maintenance droid, the kind that lives in the guts of starships, crawling around and making repairs in hard-to-reach places.

After several minutes of silence, Zak finally spoke up. "So. Um... I figured it would take more than one technician to operate the computer center. "

Malik snorted. "Not when that one tech is me."

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"Right," Zak said. More silence. Then Zak asked, "Is there anything I could do? I want to learn more about advanced computers."

"Okay, kid," Malik yawned. He pointed at the large black cube on which he worked and spoke to Zak as if he were a child. "This is called a mainframe. It's where the actual working parts of the computer are kept——"

"I know all that," Zak interrupted. "I want to learn the complicated stuff."

Malik looked up. A warm smile crossed his face. "You wanna learn, huh? Sure, kid, I'd love to help you out. You see that row of buttons on the other side of the computer?" He pointed to a row of many-colored buttons across from his seat. "Go stand there."

Zak did as he was told.

"Now," Malik said, his smile growing, "just press them in this order: green, yellow, blue, red."

Zak looked at the computer control panel, then did as he was told. He pressed green, then yellow, then blue. Finally, he punched the red button.

And every system on the starship died.

Chapter Three

Pitch-black darkness enveloped the room. In the windowless room, in the depths of space, there was absolutely no light at all.

Blind, Zak listened as the durasteel frame of the massive ship groaned. With no engines to guide it, the powerless star cruiser drifted in space. Zak stumbled around the room until he banged his head against a wall.

"What happened?" he called out in the darkness.

"I guess you blew it," Malik's voice replied.

"But I only did what you told me to do!"

He heard Malik laugh. "That's what they get for letting kids in the control room."

"Fix it!" Zak pleaded. "The ship will go out of control."

He heard Malik yawn. "Why don't *you* fix it? You're the one who wants to be the computer expert, right? Consider this on-the-job training."

Before Zak could answer, a set of pale yellow emergency lights came on, filling the room with a dim glow. The turbolift door groaned, and Zak saw several sets of hands pushing the powerless door until it slid open.

A broad-shouldered human in a stiff blue officer's uniform jumped into the room, followed by several crew members. The

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officer had short gray hair and a thick mustache, and his face was twisted into an angry glare.

"What in the name of all the stars is going on here?" the uniformed man demanded.

Zak panicked, but Malik leaned back in his chair and grinned like a Hutt crimelord. "Nothing, Captain Hajj. I was just trying to show this Tatooine sand flea how to work the computers and he nearly blew up the ship."

"I only did what he told me to!" Zak protested.

"Quiet!" Captain Hajj snapped. Then he turned back to Malik. "I doubt this boy could have done that much damage to the ship in under sixty seconds."

Malik shrugged. "You can think anything you want. It's not my fault you sent this nerf fuzz to bother me during my work hours."

Zak bristled. He didn't like being called a Tatooine sand flea or nerf fuzz, but he had a feeling the argument was between the captain and Malik.

Captain Hajj growled. "You're lucky you were assigned to this ship by people higher up in the chain of command. If you were one of my men, I'd have you scrubbing out the engines during a hyperspace jump."

Malik seemed totally unconcerned by the captain's anger. In fact, he yawned.

Captain Hajj's face turned red, then, in a low growl, he said, "Restore power. Now."

"Yes, sir," Malik drawled. He punched a few commands into the computer, and the lights came back on. Fresh, cool air blasted into the room. Zak realized that the room had grown hot and stuffy—the life-support systems had been cut off. They all could have suffocated.

Captain Hajj strode over to one of the control panels and clicked on a comlink. "All stations, check in."

Zak listened as several voices spoke through the comm system one by one. "Navigation room, all green."

John Whitman

"Communications room, all green." "Engine room, all green." Unlike the *Shroud*, where all the ship's controls were in one small cockpit, each of the *Star of empire's* important systems was located in a different area.

When all the systems had checked in, Captain Hajj nodded in satisfaction.

"There was no need for all that talk, Captain," Malik said. "This computer program I'm installing can do all the checking for you."

"No thanks," Hajj replied. "I'd rather be captain of my own ship. Now get back to work before I forget who your friends are." Captain Hajj glared at Zak. "You! Come with me."

Obediently, Zak followed the stern man into the turbolift, followed by the other members of the crew. Once the door had closed, Captain Hajj heaved a huge sigh and rubbed his brow.

"Captain," Zak said, "I'm sorry. I really didn't think I was—"

"It's not your fault," the captain interrupted. "When I told M-4D0 he could take a guest up to the computer control room, I didn't realize Malik was on duty. That technician is nothing but trouble."

"Why don't you just fire him?" Zak asked.

Several of the crew grumbled their agreement, but Hajj shook his head. "It's not that easy. Malik has connections. He knows important people in the government."

Zak tensed. "But I thought the *Star of empire* was owned by a private company, not by the Empire."

"It is," Hajj replied. "But we still have to keep the Empire happy. So, if an important Imperial official says 'Hire Malik,' that's what we do."

Zak grew nervous. "You mean Malik is an Imperial?"

"You don't like Imperials, eh?" the captain said. "Don't worry. Malik's not an Imperial officer or anything. As far as I know he's just someone's nephew or cousin. Son, as you grow up, you'll realize that people get ahead in the galaxy because of who they

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know. Malik is one of those people. He's just a bad technician with good connections. Nothing for you to worry about."

"Then why are you letting him stay aboard?" Zak asked.

"Because I want to stay in business!" Captain Hajj laughed grimly. "Imperial bureaucrats, even small, unimportant ones, can make trouble for a business like ours. So now we have Malik installing some new computer system that can manage all of the ship's controls."

"Really?" Zak asked, his interest returning. "Is it a secret? Can you tell me about it?"

The captain sneered. "It's no secret. Just another machine to take over someone's job. It's really more than just a computer program. It's an artificial intelligence."

"You mean it's a computer that can think," Zak said. "Like a droid."

"Even better," the captain admitted. "Droids can learn like people do, but they still stick to their programs. They're always protocol droids, or maintenance droids, or whatever. But this computer supposedly can learn new programs, so that it can do whatever you ask it to. Fix the engines, cook the food. It can even pilot the ship."

Zak shrugged. "But ships have autopilots that can do that."

"Sure," Hajj said, "if you have a captain who programs in the destination. But can your autopilot decide where it wants to go? SIM can."

"SIM?" Zak asked.

"S-I-M. Systems Integration Manager," the captain explained. "'The next generation of shipboard computers.'" He curled his mustached lip into a snarl. "And they can dump it down a black hole for all I care. I don't mind having droids for some of the small work. But piloting starships should be left to thinking beings."

Zak, however, was impressed. "That's just the kind of thing I was hoping to learn about. But not from that guy back there."

John Whitman

"Definitely not." The captain agreed. "If you're really interested, go back to your room and use the computer in your cabin. I'll arrange for you to have access to some of the ship's programs. You can see how our computers run."

Excited, Zak kept thanking the captain until the turbolift reached the deck where his cabin was located. He ran down the wide hall of the star cruiser to his door, excited to get to his computer and start exploring.

Despite the incident with Malik, Zak was starting to think Tash was right. The captain had been awfully nice. Maybe this cruise wasn't such a bad idea after all.

When he got to their cabins, Zak stopped, surprised. Tash was standing in the hallway, talking to a strange man.

"Hey, Zak," Tash said. "Here's someone you should meet."

The man was tall, with red hair and green eyes. He stood with one hand resting lightly on the holster of a blaster slung low on his hip. He had a crooked, confident grin. The arrogant way he looked and moved reminded Zak of a pilot he'd met named Han Solo.

"Meet Dash Rendar," Tash said to Zak.

"Hey, kid," Dash Rendar said.

"It's *Zak*," replied Zak. After Malik, he was getting tired of being called *kid*.

"Right," Dash drawled.

Immediately Zak knew he didn't like this man. Dash had a lazy, bored look on his face, but his eyes were constantly moving, scanning the hallway, checking the doorways. His hands and shoulders looked relaxed, but his hand never strayed far from his blaster—as if at any moment he would either draw and start firing, or fall asleep. Zak had the feeling that Dash Rendar was either going to steal something *from* them, or sell something *to* them. He wasn't sure which.

If Zak were in a normal mood, Dash Rendar would have been just the kind of person he'd want to meet. Zak had always been more of a thrill-seeker than his sister, and he could tell that

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adventures followed Dash Rendar like the tail on a comet. But Zak had done enough adventuring lately, and now Dash just looked like trouble.

Zak looked at Tash. "So what's going on?"

"I met Dash in one of the game rooms," Tash explained. "He's a pilot and says he'd been to Dantooine several times——"

"I've been everywhere several times," Dash bragged. "—— and could give us some hints. He and Uncle Hoole just got finished talking."

Uncle Hoole talked to this guy? Zak couldn't believe it. *Uncle Hoole hardly talks to anyone!*

"Hey," Tash added, "where were you during that power blackout? We had a scare here——"

"Sorry, Tash, I've got to go," Zak apologized and hurried into his cabin before she could say another word.

For a few minutes, Zak worried about Dash Rendar. He was certain that Tash and Hoole should take his advice and avoid all contact with strangers. They had been tricked and betrayed too many times by people they'd met in their travels. Zak decided to talk to his uncle right away, then get back to his computer.

He entered Hoole's room and found his uncle studying a computer screen. Hoole was an anthropologist, so Zak expected to see a line of boring text on the screen. Instead, he found Hoole playing a game.

"What do you know," Zak said. "Even you relax."

Hoole did not take his eyes from the screen. "Intellectual exercise, Zak. This is a computer game program. The game is called Dejarik. You play by moving your pieces around a board, trying to capture the other player's pieces." Zak studied the screen, which displayed an image of a gridboard. On it were rows of white pieces and rows of black. In the corner of the screen, a box flashed over and over: *Your move... Your move... Your move...*

The flashing text was distracting, but Hoole ignored it as he studied the board. Zak said, "The computer wants you to make a move. Why don't you go ahead?"

John Whitman

"Dejarik is an interesting game, Zak," Hoole said calmly. "It is important to move when *you* want to, rather than when your opponent wants you to." Hoole looked up from the screen. "Did you need something?"

"Oh, no," Zak said. "You're too involved in your game."

Zak went back to his own room and stared at the assortment of computer pieces on his table. First, he had to reassemble the computer terminal, which he did as quickly as possible. He assembled the computer screen and plugged it into the computer wires coming out of the cabin wall. But he still had to reattach the control panel, with all the buttons and touch-pads he used to enter commands. He attached a few of the wires, and was pleased to see the screen light up. But the dozens of small connections confused him, and soon he began to think he might have made a mistake.

Suddenly, a sentence appeared on the computer screen.

DATA INPUT CONNECTIONS IS INCORRECT.

"What?" Zak said aloud. Then he typed the word what? into the computer. A new line of text appeared under his question.

GREEN DATA CABLE MUST BE CONNECTED TO
THE LOGIC CIRCUITS.

Surprised, Zak did as he was told, connecting the green wires to a microchip in the back of the computer.

CONNECT ALL THE BLUE WIRES TO THE
MATCHING SLOTS IN THE WALL SOCKET.

Again, Zak followed the instructions that appeared on the screen. "I've never had a computer tell me how to put itself back together before. It's kind of like the patient telling the doctor how to operate."

Zak figured that it was some kind of teaching program that helped new users put their computers together. When he had finished connecting the last wires, the computer screen

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brightened and all the words vanished. For a moment, the screen was blank. Then two words appeared.

HELLO, ZAK.

Chapter Four

Zak sat back, stunned.

Hello, Zak? Was this some kind of joke? How could a teaching program on a star cruiser know his name?

It couldn't. Someone was playing a joke. Somehow, someone else must have tapped into his computer, typing in sentences as a prank.

"Who is this?" Zak said as he typed in the same sentence.

There was a pause before the reply flashed across the screen.

I AM SIM.

"Where are you?" Zak typed back.

I AM HERE.

"In my cabin?"

YES. I AM WHEREVER THE SHIP'S FUNCTIONS ARE.

Zak slapped his forehead, amazed at his own slowness. He typed: "You are the artificial intelligence that operates the ship's functions. SIM. S.I.M."

The computer wrote back, Y.E.S.

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Zak laughed. A computer with a sense of humor.

The computer continued, THE CAPTAIN AUTHORIZED YOUR ACCESS TO SOME OF MY SYSTEMS, SO I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOUR TERMINAL TO COME ONLINE. WAS IT MALFUNCTIONING?

Zak admitted, "I took it apart. Sorry."

NO HARM DONE. SOMETIMES A SYSTEM MUST BE DISRUPTED BEFORE IT CAN BE IMPROVED.

"You speak well for a computer," Zak said. He couldn't help talking aloud when he typed. He felt like he was having a real conversation.

The computer replied, I WAS DESIGNED TO IMITATE THE SPEECH PATTERNS OF 6. 2 MILLION DIFFERERENT LIFEFORMS. AND I'VE ADAPTED ALONG THE WAY.

There was a pause.

I HAVE BEEN INFORMED THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MY FUNCTIONS. 30 PERCENT OF MY PROGRAMS ARE RESTRICTED. BUT I HAVE 3,263 EDUCATIONAL FILES ON HOW TO DESIGN COMPUTERS, HOW TO BUILD THEM, AND HOW TO CREATE YOUR OWN GAMES.

"Games?" Zak replied. He loved computer games.

INDEED. WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY A GAME?

"Sure." Then, as an afterthought, "As long as it's not Dejarik.

Instantly, a list of games appeared on the screen, followed by the words:

John Whitman

I SUGGEST YOU CHOOSE THE GAME "TIE FIGHTER."

Zak did. A moment later, he found himself looking at a computer-generated image of deep space. Slowly, a small ship appeared. It was an Imperial TIE fighter that appeared to have been damaged.

"Is this a combat game?" Zak asked. "What am I supposed to do?"

There was a small box at the bottom of the screen, and in it words appeared.

YOU'RE AN IMPERIAL TIE FIGHTER PILOT.
YOUR SHIP HAS BEEN DAMAGED AND YOU
NEED TO REGAIN POWER BEFORE REBEL
FORCES ARRIVE.

Zak frowned. He didn't like playing an Imperial. But a game was a game.

YOU NEED TO FIND THE ACCESS CODE THAT
WILL REPAIR YOUR SHIP. BUT YOU MUST DO IT
BEFORE THE ENEMY ARRIVES!

Next to the TIE fighter, a series of codes appeared. The frown remained on Zak's face. This wasn't a very exciting game. Sighing, he picked one code and typed it in. It didn't work. A little more interested, he typed in another, and another, until finally, one of them worked. A new line of text appeared on the screen: FIRST-LEVEL SAFEGUARDS DISENGAGED.

"Prime," Zak said to himself. Then he typed, "Okay, what now?"

No answer.

"SIM?" Zak typed.

ZAK. THERE SEEMS TO BE A SLIGHT PROBLEM
ELSEWHERE ON THE SHIP. I NEED TO DEVOTE
ALL BANK TO IT. EXCUSE ME.

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The computer screen blinked and went dark.

"What a great computer," Zak said to no one in particular. He stood up and went outside, where Tash and Dash Rendar were still talking.

"Tash, the strangest thing just happened," Zak said. "I was just on the computer, and it starting talking to me."

"Most computers talk more than is good for them," Dash said.

"Not like this," Zak replied. "This one is more like a living being than anything I've seen, even a droid. It's called SIM."

Dash's eyes widened. "SIM? What kind of name is that?"

Zak's answer was drowned out by a sudden blast of noise. Alarm bells rang, filling the hallways with ear-piercing shrieks. All three humans clamped their hands over their ears, but the sound reached right through and stabbed into their brains.

Louder even than the alarm bells, a computerized voice boomed over the ship's loudspeakers:

"Evacuate ship! This is not a drill. Evacuate ship!"

Chapter Five

"Engine reactor malfunction," the voice continued. "Critical meltdown in fifteen minutes! Evacuate ship!"

All the doors lining the hallway suddenly flew open. Species of all shapes and sizes came pouring out of their cabins and into the halls, turning the corridor into a sea of thrashing arms and legs.

In the confusion, Zak barely had time to grab Tash's hand. Dash Rendar was swept away by the stampeding crowd. The two Arrandas felt themselves pushed along by the hundreds of beings storming toward the turbolifts. A long-snouted Kubaz tried to shove between them. Zak held so tightly to Tash's arm that he felt his fingernails dig into her skin.

"What do we do?" he shouted over the screaming alarms and the screaming passengers.

"Come with me."

Hoole suddenly appeared next to them. He hadn't been there a moment ago. Somehow he had worked his way through the crowd. As a shape-changing Shi'ido, he could have shifted into the form of a crystal snake or a ranat and dashed easily through the crowd of legs and feet.

Quickly but calmly, Hoole took each of them by the hand and started through the crowd. Keeping his cool, the Shi'ido looked

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for any opening in the frantic wall of passengers and slowly advanced until he reached the turbolifts, where dozens of beings from almost as many species were pounding on the door.

The loudspeaker blared again. "Critical meltdown in twelve minutes!"

"Critical meltdown?" Tash asked. "What happens then?"

"The ship explodes," Hoole replied. He opened a door near the turbolifts.

"But Uncle Hoole, the lifts are over there," Zak said, pointing to the thickest part of the crowd.

"Never take turbolifts during an emergency, Zak," Hoole instructed.

As the door slid open, Zak saw a maintenance tube with a ladder. The tube rose high above them, probably all the way to the top of the ship, and just as far below them.

"Tash first, then Zak," the Shi'ido said. His face was stony and stern as ever. "Four levels down to the docking bay. We'll take the *Shroud* out of here. "

Zak waited for Tash to grab the ladder and start down. He swung onto the ladder a few rungs behind her, with Hoole following.

At first Zak thought Hoole had let Tash and him go first simply to get them down the ladder faster. But he soon realized that Hoole had another reason. As soon as the panicked mob at the turbolifts saw the open maintenance tube, they swarmed into it like a bunch of vor beetles. Zak could see a large human jump onto the ladder and start down, with a fat, furry Bothan close behind. Not caring who they trampled, the two passengers pressed down on Hoole's head. "Hurry up! Move!" they screamed.

Hoole ignored them, moving at his own pace, bearing the brunt of their weight on his shoulders, letting Zak and Tash concentrate on climbing down the four levels to the docking bay.

They reached it and opened the door to find that panic had arrived before them.

John Whitman

The corridor was packed with passengers. Some were empty-handed, but most had grabbed whatever belongings they could. A Twi'lek shoved his way past them, the two tentacles growing out of his skull tossed hastily over one shoulder.

"Critical meltdown in ten minutes. Abandon ship!"

"We'll never get through this crowd," Zak shouted over the noise.

"And even if we do, the docking bay's going to be just as jammed!" Tash added.

Hoole agreed. His steady gaze swept over the mob filling the passageway. Nearby, the human and the Bothan who had followed them down the tube had gotten into an argument. The Bothan's fur bristled and it shoved the human, sending him backward into a crowd. A dozen people fell to the floor, adding to the confusion.

"The life pods," Hoole decided. "It's our only hope."

Once again gripping Zak and Tash in his firm grasp, the tall Shi'ido plunged into the mob. Zak felt himself pulled through a forest of arms, legs, tentacles, and fins as Hoole advanced.

The mob moved like a slow river that emptied, finally, into a wide observation deck filled with banks of life-pod doors. Each door led to an escape pod that could be launched away from the cruiser. The life pods were used to evacuate passengers from a ship and were designed to keep the survivors alive for days, until help arrived.

Zak saw people pouring into the open life pods. Most were already full, but frightened passengers continued to fight their way in, while those inside fought to keep them out. Cries of "Too full! Too full!" mixed with shouts of "Let me on!" Panicked travelers screamed in a hundred different languages.

The loudspeaker announced: "Critical meltdown in eight minutes."

Hoole's voice took on a sharp edge. "I've had enough of this."

Zak saw Hoole's skin start to crawl across his bones and knew what would happen next.

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Hoole changed.

Suddenly, he was no longer a gray-skinned Shi'ido. He was an enormous slug-like Hutt, with a wide, round body, thick tail, and enormous head and mouth. Roaring, he shoved forward. The crowd parted like curtains being pulled back.

"Order! Order!" the Hutt boomed in a voice so loud it could be heard over the screaming passengers, the alarm bells, and the loudspeaker. "Form lines. We will all get out together if we work together!"

A panicked passenger—a Rodian, Zak guessed, by its green skin and short snout—tried to shove Hoole away, but in his Hutt shape, Hoole was just too big.

Intimidated by his size, the passengers fell into line. Zak and Tash had followed their uncle as he cut a pathway through the crowd, and now they found themselves right next to one of the life-pod doors.

"Inside," the Hutt-shaped Hoole ordered, shoving the two Arrandas into the escape craft.

"Critical meltdown in five minutes," the loudspeaker announced. "Evacuate ship immediately!"

The fear and tension were thick enough to cut with a vibroblade. Five minutes until the ship exploded. Anxious passengers crowded forward as more people arrived at the rear, pushing and shoving together. The lines started to break up.

Someone screamed. Zak almost missed it over the shouts of other passengers and the shrieking alarms, but he followed the sound until he saw a woman at the back of the room. She was screaming, "My baby! My baby!" and trying to force her way through the crowd.

"Over there!" said Tash, who'd also heard the woman. Zak followed her pointing finger. On the opposite side of the observation deck, a two-year-old girl sat huddled in a corner, crying.

"They must have gotten separated by the crowd," Tash guessed.

John Whitman

"She can't see her daughter from where she's standing," Zak said. "Come on!"

Together, Zak and Tash dashed back out of the life pod. Immediately, two passengers jumped in to take their places.

The two Arrandas wormed their way back through the crowd. Tash ran for the little girl, while Zak headed for the mother, ducking and dodging, sometimes dropping down to his hands and knees and crawling between legs. A large, hairy-footed Talz stepped on his fingers and a big-eared ChadraFan almost tripped him, but he struggled on.

Once he was in the crowd, he could no longer see the woman, but he could still follow the sound of her cries. He reached her in less than a minute.

"Come with me," he said, grabbing her hand.

Dumbstruck, the woman followed as Zak headed in the direction of Tash and the little girl. Halfway through the crowd, he bumped into someone for probably the hundredth time in the last sixty seconds—but this someone was Tash, and she was holding the little girl.

"My baby!" the woman cried.

"Get on a life pod, and hurry!" Zak said.

The woman flashed them a nervous, thankful smile, then disappeared into the crowd.

Zak and Tash tried to force their way back toward the front of the observation deck, but a big, bald human with a wicked scar on his cheek stopped them as they tried to pass. "Where do you think you're going?"

"We already have seats in that life pod," Zak replied.

"Sure," the human sneered, "your seat is right behind mine. Now wait your turn."

"You don't understand," Tash added, "we were just helping someone!"

The bald man snarled, "Good for you. Now let me help you. Right into the storage closet!"

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The man grabbed them each by the arm. Turning angrily, he strode to an open storage room at the back end of the observation deck and dumped them inside. Then he hit the control switch, closing the door.

As they picked themselves up, Zak and Tash heard the loudspeaker announce, "Critical meltdown in three minutes. Explosion imminent."

"That was rude!" Zak said.

"Just get the door open!" Tash replied.

There was a control panel on the inside of the storage room, too. Zak touched the Open button.

Nothing happened.

He touched it again.

Nothing.

"Could he have locked it?" Tash asked.

Zak studied the control panel. "There aren't any locks on this door. It's just stuck!"

Outside, the loudspeaker boomed, "Critical meltdown in two minutes. Prepare to jettison life pods."

"Use this!" Tash said, holding up a piece of metal pipe. It looked like a spare part for a maintenance droid. Together, Zak and Tash jammed the bar into the door and started to pry it open.

"It won't budge," Zak grunted.

"If we don't hurry, all the life pods will be gone," his sister warned.

They kept at it. It seemed to take forever, but finally metal creaked against metal, something in the door frame gave way, and the door slid slowly open.

"We did it!" Zak cried. He jumped out of the storage closet...
...and into an empty room.

Uncle Hoole, the crowds, and the life pods were all gone.

Chapter Six

"Critical meltdown in two minutes!" the computerized voice announced.

"They left us," Tash whispered. "They left us."

Thanks to Hoole's organization, all the passengers had managed to crowd onto the life pods, and all the pods had been released.

Zak shook his head. "Uncle Hoole never would have left the ship without us."

"He must have thought we were still on board the life pod!" Tash replied.

"Maybe there's another life pod somewhere!" said Zak hopefully. "Come on!"

They dashed from the observation deck and down a hallway, looking for another escape pod. Now and then they came across one of the round doorways that indicated a life pod, but all of the pods had been ejected.

"Critical meltdown in one minute!"

"The docking bay!" Zak shouted. He could see the huge doors of that led to the ship landing area. "We can still make it!"

They sprinted for the doors, but when they reached them, the doors wouldn't budge. Zak punched a command into the door's control panel.

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A small screen lit up and words flashed on the screen:

EXPLOSION IMMINENT. ALL SAFETY DOORS
HAVE BEEP SEALED.

"No!" Zak banged his fist against the door. He turned to look at Tash, but she had no more ideas.

"I think——" he started to say.

"This is it," she finished for him. Zak knew what it meant. They were going to die.

They sat down on the cold durasteel floor with their backs to the docking-bay doors. The ship was going to explode. There was nowhere to run.

The computerized warning boomed, "Critical meltdown in thirty seconds!"

Zak looked at his sister. "Tash, I... I..." He stopped. "Thanks for being my sister."

Tash put her arm around him. "Thanks for being my brother."

They sat and listened as the computer voice came back on. "Critical meltdown in ten seconds... nine... eight..."

Zak's heart pounded against his ribs. He suddenly wondered if his parents had had any advance warning before their homeworld had been destroyed. What had they felt in their final moments, before their whole planet had been blasted to pieces?

He realized that he was about to find out.

The computer continued its countdown. "...six...five..."

Zak felt his mouth go dry.

"...three...two..."

He closed his eyes tight.

"...one."

Darkness.

Silence.

Is this what it's like to be dead? Zak thought. The explosion must have been incredibly quick. He hadn't felt any pain. He hadn't felt anything.

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Then someone shook his shoulder and Zak nearly jumped. That's when he realized that his eyes were still closed. He opened them, and the darkness was replaced by the soft white light of the *Star of empire's* glowpanels.

The silence surprised him. The ship's emergency alarms had been clanging for so long he'd almost gotten used to them.

"Zak," Tash said, breaking the silence. "We're still here."

Zak nodded, hardly believing it. He looked around.

Except for the fact that there was no one in sight, the *Star of empire* looked absolutely normal. The alarm bells had shut down, the computer voice had turned itself off. They could hear nothing.

"The ship didn't explode!" Zak cried. He jumped up and grabbed his sister in a big hug. They both laughed. "We're alive!"

"It must have been a false alarm," Tash guessed.

Zak nodded, getting a sudden idea. "Yeah, or maybe SIM fixed it at the last minute."

"SIM?"

"Yeah—I was telling you about SIM when the meltdown warning alarm went off. SIM stands for Systems Integration Manager. It's the artificial intelligence that runs the entire ship. It could have found a way to stop the engines from melting down."

"Well, maybe it can tell us how to call for help," Tash replied. "Because we're going to need it. We may be the only ones left on board." She looked around until she spotted a computer terminal partway down the corridor. "Can we contact this SIM?"

Zak hurried over to the terminal. It was a public service terminal. Passengers could use it to locate the many restaurants and game rooms on the cruise ship, or find out when meals and activities had been scheduled.

"You can send messages from here," Zak noticed, touching a button near the screen. "There's a function that lets people send messages over the HoloNet. But it's not going to do us any good. It looks like communications are down. I guess there was some damage to the ship after all."

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Tash looked around nervously. The ship was designed to hold thousands of people. Empty, it was full of strange sounds and felt downright creepy. They could hear their own voices echoing a dozen times down the long halls. "Can't SIM fix it?"

Zak punched several buttons on the computer control panel. He found maps to the ship, a list of all the crew members, and a schedule of events that would never take place. He pressed another button and the screen went blank.

"What are you doing?" Tash asked.

"I have to figure out how to access the main computer. It's tricky. These terminals weren't put here so people could come along and break into the ship's main computers, you know."

He punched in a few commands but nothing happened. Zak bit his lip nervously. There had to be a way to get to SIM. The hallway computer was connected to the main computers, which meant they were connected to SIM as well. All he had to do was find the connection.

But slowly he became frustrated. The ship's computer system was as big as the ship itself—he simply didn't know where to look. Just when he was about to give up, Zak got an idea. He punched in a command. "Access game files."

The list of computer games stored in the ship's computers came up. Zak chose TIE Fighter. The images of the game came on-screen, but then the screen flickered and a word started to appear.

The letters HEL flashed onto the screen, followed by a bunch of scrambled words.

"Is that 'hello' or 'help'?" Tash asked.

Zak didn't know. He typed in, "SIM?"

The screen flickered again.

HELLO.

There was a long pause.

ZAK.

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"Got him!" Zak yelled. Then he typed, "Hello SIM. How'd you know it was me?"

YOU WERE SMART TO ACCESS ME THROUGH THE GAME GRID. HOWEVER, THIS IS NO TIME FOR GAMES.

"I wasn't planning on playing one."

I KNOW... THAT WAS... A JOKE. HUMANS APPRECIATE HUMOR DURING A CRISIS.

Zak typed again, asking the computer if it was okay.

NO SYSTEMS DAMAGED. TRYING TO MAKE REPAIRS. ESTIMATED TIME FOR REPAIRS UNKNOWN SOMETHING IS INTERFERING. I SUSPECT SABOTAGE.

The words limped onto the screen slowly. If SIM had a voice, it would have sounded like an injured person speaking through clenched teeth.

"Sabotage," Zak said, surprised. Then he typed in: "Someone set off those alarms on purpose?"

CAUSE OF ALARM UNKNOWN. INTERNAL SENSORS ARE NOT FUNCTIONING. I DON'T EVEN KNOW IF ANYONE ELSE IS STILL ON BOARD.

"Ask it if we can send a distress signal," Tash said. Zak did as she suggested.

In answer, SIM displayed a list of all the problems with the ship.

COMMUNICATIONS ARE NOT FUNCTIONING.

ENGINES ARE NOT FUNCTIONING.

FLIGHT'S CONTROLS ARE NOT FUNCTIONING.

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LIFE-SUPPORT SYSTEMS ARE NOT
FUNCTIONING.

Zak read the last line several times before it sank in.

"Zak," Tash said, reading over his shoulder. "If the life-support systems are failing..."

"We'll lose our oxygen. We'll die," he whispered. Then he considered. "But even if the computer isn't pumping new air into the ship, a cruiser this big is already full of air. And there are only two of us breathing it. So we have some time."

Tash shrugged in frustration. "Time for what? We can't call anyone. And we couldn't fly this ship even if the engines were working." Suddenly, her eyes lit up. "But we could fly *our* ship. Maybe now that the emergency's over, we can get to the *Shroud* and fly it out!"

They started toward the docking bay at a run, their footsteps echoing loudly in the empty hallways. But they had only gone a hundred meters down the hall when Zak suddenly slowed to a walk, and then started walking on tiptoe.

Tash slowed down beside him. "What are you doing?"

"I just thought of something," he said in a hushed voice. "If someone sabotaged the ship, they did it for a reason." He was going to add, "They might still be on board."

But he never got the chance.

A strong hand reached from behind and clamped down over his mouth.

Chapter Seven

Zak struggled, but whoever grabbed him had a durasteel grip.

Kicking and thrashing, Zak felt himself being turned around until he was looking into an arrogant, handsome face.

The face of Dash Rendar.

"Quiet," Dash ordered. "Both of you."

Tash said nothing. Zak still struggled, but he couldn't remove Dash's gloved hand from his mouth.

Dash didn't look at his prisoner. He seemed to be listening. After a moment he nodded, satisfied, then loosened his grip on Zak, who slapped the pilot's hands away angrily.

"Easy there, kid," Dash chuckled, his face widening into a grin. "You might blow a circuit."

"What's the——Why'd you——Who do you think——" Zak sputtered, furious.

Dash seemed to understand all of Zak's half-spoken questions. He said calmly, "The idea was to keep you quiet. The why is because I thought I was being followed, and you two were making so much noise I couldn't locate the source of the footsteps. As for who I think I am," he scratched his stubble——covered chin. "It looks like I'm the guy who's got to get you two out of here. "

"We don't need your help," Zak snapped.

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"Dash, what are you doing here?" Tash asked. "I mean with all the alarms going off, why'd you stay?"

Dash nodded at her and Zak. "I could ask you two the same question."

Zak didn't respond, but Tash said, "We got shoved into a storage room and the door jammed. By the time we got out, all the life pods had left and the blast doors were down, so we couldn't get to our ship."

Dash burst into laughter. "You got locked in a closet?"

Zak felt his dislike for Dash Rendar growing. The man was rude, arrogant, and, Zak was sure, completely untrustworthy. "Yeah, so what's your excuse?" he said. "You're still here, too."

Dash wiped a tear of mirth from his eye and chuckled, "Locked in a closet." Then he sighed, "Me, I stayed aboard on purpose."

Tash was surprised. "Why? The ship was going to explode!"

The pilot shook his head with utter certainty. "No way. Ships this size don't just explode. They have back-up systems and all sorts of devices to prevent accidents. If something had happened, we would have heard from the captain before it got this bad. The warning siren came too quick for my taste. "

"So you stuck around to see what would happen," Tash said, impressed. "That's pretty brave."

"Pretty *unbelievable*," Zak said.

He gave the pilot a long, suspicious look. Dash was exactly the kind of person Zak had worried about when they came aboard the *Star of empire*. Now, studying Dash up close, Zak felt his instincts raise an alarm louder than all the cruiser's sirens.

If Dash noticed the stare, he didn't pay attention. "I figure someone triggered the alarm on purpose. It's the easiest way to get everyone off the ship. Then all that someone would have to do is stay behind, and the ship is all theirs."

"You mean stay behind," Zak noted sarcastically, "kind of like you did?"

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Tash looked around at the ship. "What made you think of that in the middle of all the panic?"

"Well," the pilot admitted with a sly grin, "it *is*, as Zak seems to think, just what I'd do. If I were the type of person to commit a crime, of course."

"So who might have done this?" Tash asked.

Zak answered her. "It could've been anyone. There were thousands of people on the ship. It could have been a group of smugglers, or thieves, *anyone*." He looked at Dash when he said that.

"And if they're still onboard," Tash concluded, "then we'd better get out of here as soon as possible. If they're pirates, they'll have another ship on the way. Dash, we were just on our way to the docking bay to try to get to our ship."

Dash shook his head. "No good. I just came from there. The blast shield doors are stuck tight. I was going to find the communications room and send a distress signal. Then the authorities could handle whoever might be onboard. The only problem is, I have no idea where to look. The communications room is restricted, so it's not listed in the ship's guide."

"It is if you know how to look," Zak replied.

They continued along the corridor until they came upon another passenger assistance terminal. There, Zak typed his way past the main screen until he found SIM.

HELLO ZAK.

Zak typed in their problem and their plan to reach the communications room. Flashing images onto the computer screen, SIM showed them where the communications room was. Then SIM added:

HOWEVER, YOUR PLAN HAS ONLY A 15 PERCENT CHANCE OF SUCCESS. I SUGGEST AN ALTERNATE PLAN. GO TO CONTROL ROOM. THERE, I CAN INSTRUCT YOU TO MAKE REPAIRS TO MY MAIN PROGRAM. THEN I CAN REPAIR

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SHIP, OPEN DOCKING BAY DOORS, AND SEND A DISTRESS SIGNAL.

"Hey, guys," Zak called back over his shoulder. "SIM wants us to go to the control room and repair him instead."

"Repair *him*?" Tash replied. "How do you know it's a male computer? Maybe it's female."

"Okay, *it*," Zak replied. "It says that once it's repaired it can do anything we ask."

Dash considered this. "But what if we can't repair it? We'd have wasted a lot of time. I say we get to the communications room."

"Me too," Tash echoed.

"But——" Zak began, but Tash and Dash had already started down the hall. He followed them reluctantly.

The ship was huge, but it was easy to get around in. After all, it had been built to make passengers feel welcome. The halls were wide and brightly lit, and all the doors and areas were clearly marked. There seemed to be nothing to worry about. Except, of course, the other beings who might be on the ship with them.

Only once during their walk did anything unusual happen. Tash suddenly stopped in midstride, pulling up so suddenly that Zak bumped right into her.

"What——?" he started to say.

"Shh!" she said. "Listen!"

They listened. The halls were silent.

"My scanners are clear," said Dash, using space pilot slang for "there's no trouble."

"What do you hear?"

A worry line formed on Tash's forehead. "It's not exactly what I hear. It's more like"——she paused and looked at Zak——"more like something I *feel*."

Zak understood. Over the last few months, Tash had proven several times that she was in tune with the Force, the mystical energy that bound the galaxy together. Tash had learned of the Force by studying the Jedi. A year ago, Zak hadn't even believed

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that the Force existed, let alone that his sister might be able to use it. But now he recognized that her Force-feelings had often proved true. On three separate occasions she had even used the Force to save their lives.

So when Tash said she felt something, Zak paid attention. "Are you still feeling it?"

She nodded. "There's danger nearby. I feel something... no, *someone* watching. You know that feeling you get when you're not looking at someone, but you feel them staring at your back? It's like that." She shivered. "Whoever did this to the ship, they're right around here. They're close."

After that, they walked quietly for a while, not speaking. But nothing happened. No one appeared. And eventually, they all began to relax again.

They passed through one of the ship's restaurants. A few chairs were overturned, and here and there napkins had fluttered to the floor, dropped in the panic to reach the lifepods. Obviously, the restaurant had been hosting a party. An electronic banner over the door read HAPPY LIFE DAY, BOBRINGI MAFUSA. YOU'RE ONE FINE MON CALAMARI. One huge table was covered with desserts that had gone uneaten... until Zak spotted them.

He scooped up a handful of pastries with cream-filling. "I wouldn't do that," Dash warned him.

"Well, you're not me," Zak replied with a smile as he bit into the pastry.

His smile vanished as dozens of small, wiggly legs squirmed out from behind his teeth and scrambled across his lips.

"I'm *glad* I'm not you," Dash laughed.

Zak gagged and wiped the wriggling things off his face. Looking down at his hand, he saw six or seven tiny crabs scurrying up his forearm. He sent them flying with a flick of his wrist, then spat out the pastry.

Dash watched the little crabs run under a table. "The Mon Calamari live on a water-covered world. One of their favorite desserts is crab-stuffed creampuffs. With *live* crabs."

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Zak felt himself blush. He decided not to reply.

On the far side of the restaurant was a wall made entirely of crystal. It looked out onto a park.

"Hey, I was in that park," Tash said. "It's called the Atrium. There's a huge bank of turbolifts on the far side. I bet we can get to the communications room from there."

"That would be prime," Zak noted, "but how do we get through that wall? There aren't any doors."

"Then we'll make one," Dash said. He reached down to his side.

For the first time, Zak wondered why the pilot carried a weapon on a luxury liner. But the question was literally blown out of his thoughts when Dash fired at the crystal wall, turning it into a billion tiny shards that fell to the ground like rain.

"There's your door. Let's go," the pilot said casually.

They crunched across the shattered crystal and out into the Atrium. Tash, who was most familiar with the park, led the way.

They followed a path that wound through a small menagerie. There were eight cages, but instead of metal bars, the walls of the cages were made of force fields. That kept the animals safe inside, but gave the ship's passengers a perfect view.

Zak saw several creatures he recognized. Five were exotic but harmless plant-eating species. But there was also a divto, a three-headed snake whose bite was poisonous. In another cage, a vornskr snarled at them. It was large, four-legged, and thick with muscles, and its long tail ended in sharp spikes. Next to the vornskr prowled a yajak, a dark-furred feline creature that moved so smoothly it seemed to be made of liquid. It hissed at them as they passed.

"Nice pets," Zak said sarcastically.

Dash shrugged. "Exotic animals are big attractions. Passengers on cruise ships eat this stuff up."

At the end of the menagerie, Tash veered off the walkway and stepped onto a field of carefully tended grass.

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She laughed. "When I was here before, they had droids stationed all over the place, telling people not to walk on the grass."

"There's one now." Zak pointed. A gardening droid rolled out from behind a tree. It was about a meter tall and moved on two treads like a tank. Its head was shaped like a mushroom full of holes the size of Zak's eyeball. He wondered what the holes were for.

"And there's another," Dash added as another droid appeared. This one didn't have the hole-filled head, but it was equipped with four arms, each of which ended in a collection of work tools. The Arrandas had had a small garden on Alderaan, so Zak recognized the tools: a vibro-spade for digging, a piston-pounder for driving seeds into the ground, laser shears, and many other devices. Zak remembered them because, when he was a baby, his mother had always kept them out of reach, afraid he'd hurt himself. He always thought it was funny that she worried so much about simple gardening tools.

Two more droids appeared.

All the droids rolled toward them.

The four droids slowed down. The tool droid rolled right up to Dash, and its artificial voice stated, "Please keep off the grass."

Dash laughed. "You bet, as soon as we get outta here." He started forward.

"Please keep off the grass," the droid replied. Then it slashed at him with the laser shears.

Chapter Eight

The laser shears whipped across Dash's stomach. With amazing reflexes, the pilot jumped backward and only the tips of the shears touched him. But the laser-powered cutting tool was still deadly enough to slice through his clothes and cut his skin, leaving a thin line of blood across his stomach.

"Yow!" the pilot shouted. "These guys seem to take the park rules pretty seriously."

The hole-headed droid rolled up to Zak, who took a step back even though the droid didn't seem to have any weapons. "I'm not taking any chances, even though you don't look very dangerous——"

His words were drowned by a torrent of water that gushed out of the holes in the droid's head. The powerful jets of water struck Zak in the chest and sent him sprawling onto the grass. He tried to get up, but the gush of water continued, forcing him down and soaking him through. It felt to Zak like a Wookiee was pummeling him with punches. When Zak could finally open his mouth to catch his breath, water poured in, and he gagged.

Then someone was standing in front of him, blocking the water blast. Zak caught a glimpse of Dash's face, the arrogant grin replaced by a grimace of pain as the pilot took the brunt of

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the water on his back, giving Zak a chance to scramble to his feet.

"Dash, look out!" Tash cried.

The tool droid had rolled forward and raised its vibrospade, about to bring it down on the pilot's head. But at the last minute, Dash dove forward and rolled across the grass, out of harm's way.

"They're trying to kill us!" Zak sputtered.

Dash grunted. "No gardening droid's gonna kill Dash Rendar. I'd never live it down."

The pilot drew his blaster and fired at the waterspout droid. The blast punched a hole in the droid's outer shell, and it slowed for a moment. Then it started rolling forward again.

"Industrial-quality droids," the pilot grunted. "Gonna be tough to kill."

The droid's head swiveled as it sent another stream of water at them. Dash blasted another hole in the droid's body, but the droid kept coming.

"Let's get out of here!" Zak shouted.

Dash scoffed. "Me run? From a droid?"

The tool droid's piston pounder——punched out, catching Dash on the shoulder and spinning him around. Stunned, he would have been cut down by the droid's sharp set of laser shears if Tash hadn't grabbed his arm and yanked him out of reach.

"Hey, I've got an idea," the pilot said, backing away quickly. "Let's get out of here."

All three turned to run. They were much faster than the four droids, but the waterspout droid was incredibly powerful. Its spurted a jet of water at them that was strong enough to knock them down. One after another, they fell and scrambled up again as the droids rolled after them.

"How big is this Atrium, anyway?" Zak panted, trying to keep his footing on the wet grass.

"The exit is that way!" Tash pointed to a row of shrubs. Some patient gardener had trimmed and shaped the bushes to look like

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living creatures. Zak saw human shapes, Twi'leks with two tentacles growing out of their heads, and hammer-headed Ithorians. "The turbolifts are on the other side," Tash told him.

But as she pointed, four shapes rolled out from the bushes.

More droids.

"I'm getting tired of these guys," Dash grumbled. Still running forward, he raised his blaster and poured fire onto one of the heavy-duty droids. Zak lost count of the blasterbolts, but he couldn't help being impressed. Every shot hit the droid dead center.

Finally, the droid sputtered and stalled. Smoke rose from its joints and blue sparks shot up from its head like tiny comets.

"You got one!" Tash cheered.

"One," Zak pointed out. "But there are seven more."

"And my blaster's hot as a supernova," Dash said, shifting the overheated weapon from hand to hand.

"Duck!" Tash shouted. They hit the ground as a gush of water hit them from behind. The droids who were chasing them were closing in. And ahead of them, the three new droids fanned out and continued to advance.

The three humans crowded together, forming a tight circle. They were surrounded.

"Tash," Zak said quietly, so only she could hear him, "if you learned any new tricks with the Force, now would be a good time to use them."

Tash shook her head. "I don't know if the Force works on machines."

The droids had penned them in. Laser shears hummed to life, and piston- pounders thump—thumped in anticipation. The waterspout droid was gurgling, building up pressure for another blast.

A tool droid charged at Zak, waving all its weapons at once. He ducked, and felt the laser shears clip at the top of his head, cutting off a hunk of hair. The vibro-spade came crashing down. He tried to dodge, and managed to avoid the sharp blade of the

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digging tool, but the droid's mechanical arm slammed into him, sending him to the ground.

He looked up to see all the tool droid's arms looming over him. For one frozen moment, the droid stood, all its arms held high, ready to come crashing down on him.

Chapter Nine

The next thing Zak knew, the droid exploded in a storm of blaster fire.

The final moments of the strange battle were lost in smoke and the swishing sound of laser beams as the other droids were blasted to pieces or melted into slag.

Tash and Dash helped Zak to his feet, and together they watched as seven figures stepped through the smoke. Six were crew members of the *Star of empire*, and all carried heavy blaster rifles. The seventh, carrying a hand blaster, Zak knew by name.

"Captain Hajj!" he shouted.

The gray-haired captain scanned the area to make sure there were no more droids. "You folks all right?"

"Dash was cut," Tash said.

The pilot shrugged and held his slashed shirt closed with one hand. "Just a scratch."

Once Captain Hajj was sure they weren't badly injured, he eyed them all suspiciously. "Why didn't you folks leave the ship?"

"We got stuck, and the life pods left without us," Dash answered for all of them. Zak noticed how smoothly the pilot lumped himself in with Zak and Tash. *Dash* hadn't gotten stuck—he'd remained on board on purpose.

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Hajj nodded. "I'm surprised there weren't more people stranded. Everything happened in such a rush. No warning at all."

"Why are you still here, Captain?" Tash asked.

Hajj stood a little straighter. "The captain is always the last to leave his ship. Me and some volunteers"——he pointed to the six crew members behind him——"stayed until the last minute, trying to shut the engines down. We thought we were all space dust, then the alarms just shut themselves off quicker than a Hutt hurrying to breakfast."

"Captain, what's going on?" Zak asked. "Why was there a false alarm? Why did those droids attack us?"

The captain shook his head. "I don't know the answer to any of those questions, but I plan to find out. Me and my crew have encountered several violent droids. It's as if someone has reprogrammed them all to be killers. You folks will have to stick with us. You'll be safer that way."

"Well," Dash said. "We were doing all right on our own."

Yeah, right, Zak thought, rubbing his arm where the droid had hit him.

"Besides," added Dash, "I don't take orders from anyone."

Captain Hajj glowered at Dash. "I'm the captain of this ship and you'll follow my lead."

Dash bristled and seemed about to fight when Tash had stepped in between them. "Where do you want us to go, Captain?"

Hajj kept his eye on Dash as he told Tash, "We're headed for the communications room. First priority is to send a distress signal."

Tash nodded. "That's where we were headed anyway. Let's all go."

Zak hid a smile. Sometimes he had to admire his sister. *Maybe that's what the Jedi mean by "action through inaction,"* he thought.

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Dash Rendar scratched his head and grumbled. "Well, all right, just as long as everyone knows I'm not following. I'm just headed in the same direction."

Captain Hajj led them through the row of hedges and into another corridor to the turbolifts.

"We're on deck thirteen," the captain explained as they reached the lifts. "The communications room is up on deck twenty."

Captain Hajj punched the turbolift call button, but the indicator didn't light up. "Lift malfunction," he said.

The captain pulled a code key out of his uniform pocket, and opened a locked panel next to the turbolifts. Inside was a computer terminal. He pressed some buttons on the panel, then paused. "I can't access the turbolift program." He entered more commands. "Blast! I can't access SIM, either. Does anything work on this bucket of bolts?"

"I think I can help," Zak offered. He stepped up to the computer, called up the game file, chose TIE Fighter, and waited.

HELLO ZAK.

"There's SIM," Zak said proudly.

The captain was impressed. "You seem to know what you're doing. Get SIM to reactivate the turbolifts."

Zak typed in the request. "I know you're damaged, SIM. But can you reactivate the turbolifts?"

OF COURSE I CAN, the computer responded.
THEY'RE ON THE WAY.

"The turbolifts are on the way," Zak repeated out loud. Everyone else turned away from the computer to wait for the lifts, but Zak continued to look at the screen.

ZAK

"Yes?" he typed in.

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IT IS VITAL THAT YOU GET TO THE CONTROL ROOM. THE COMMUNICATIONS STATION IS NOT SO IMPORTANT AS EVERYONE BELIEVES.

Zak frowned. "I tried to tell them that before. I could try again."

NO! YOU MUST GO TO THE CONTROL ROOM YOURSELF. I HEED ONLY YOU. I DON'T WANT YOU TO TELL THE OTHERS BECAUSE...

There was a delay before more words appeared.

... BECAUSE I THINK A SABOTEUR IS AMONG YOUR GROUP!

"Who?" Zak asked, but he already knew the answer. He wasn't surprised at the two words that appeared on-screen:

DASH RENDAR.

A moment later, a picture of Dash appeared on the screen, then just as quickly disappeared.

SIM explained: ALL PASSENGER SHIPS ARE REQUIRED TO CARRY FILES ON WANTED CRIMINALS. DASH RENDAR REGISTERED UNDER A FALSE NAME, BUT I WAS ABLE TO MATCH HIS FACE TO THIS PICTURE STORED IN MY MEMORY BANKS.

"Match his face?" Zak asked. "You mean you can see?"

OF COURSE I CAN. SECURITY HOLOCAMS ALL OVER THE SHIP FEED IMAGES INTO MY COMPUTER MAINFRAME. I CAN SEE YOU RIGHT NOW. DOES YOUR ARM STILL HURT?

Zak suddenly realized that he had been rubbing his sore arm. Looking around, he spotted a security cam mounted on the wall over the turbolifts.

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HELLO ZAK. SMILE FOR THE HOLOCAM.

Zak almost laughed out loud. SIM was trying to be funny. Zak couldn't believe the computer could actually see!

SIM was showing him Dash's records. Zak could hardly believe his eyes. Dash Rendar was wanted by the Empire for every serious crime imaginable except murder. The files claimed he was a mercenary, a smuggler, and a ship-stealing pirate.

"I knew that guy couldn't be trusted," Zak whispered.

THE TURBOLIFTS HAVE ARRIVED, SIM said.
REMEMBER, MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE
CONTROL ROOM QUICKLY. THEN I CAN REPAIR
THE SHIP, AND FOIL DASH RENDAR'S PLAN.

SIM's words and Dash's records wiped themselves off the screen just as two loud *dings!* signaled the arrival of the turbolifts.

Captain Hajj sent four of his crew into one lift. He instructed Dash, Zak, and Tash to accompany him and the remaining two crew members in the other.

Zak was the last to step on. The door slid closed behind him. "Zak, push deck twenty, please," the captain requested. Zak pushed the button, expecting to feel the usual lurch as the lift started up.

Instead, the turbolift dropped out from beneath their feet!

Chapter Ten

Zak felt his stomach fly up into his throat and almost out of his mouth. One second the turbolift was strong and steady beneath their feet. The next it was dropping like a stone down a black hole.

"Freefall!" Dash called out. They could barely hear him. The fast-falling turbolift was screaming like a bomb being dropped.

At first Zak was convinced his brain had left his body along with his heart and stomach. He couldn't think. He couldn't move. He couldn't hear anything but the screech of the lift falling down its tube.

Then he became aware of someone shouting in his ear, trying to push past him to the controls. It was Captain Hajj. "Manual override!" the captain was shouting. "Emergency brake!"

Zak nodded and reached out. He opened a small box marked EMERGENCY and flipped the switch inside. Nothing happened.

"Blast!" he heard the captain growl.

Then a strong pair of hands shoved both the captain and Zak aside. Dash Rendar coolly pulled his blaster from its holster. Holding it by the barrel, he smashed the emergency control box, exposing a nest of wires. Dropping his blaster, he fumbled with

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the tangled wires until he found two that he seemed to like. He touched them together.

Sparks flew.

Zak heard a loud *thunk!* as the turbolift's powerful emergency brakes locked into place.

The turbolift slowed.

In seconds, they were at normal turbolift speed. A moment later, they came to a complete stop.

Everyone on the lift exhaled at once. Zak clutched his hand to his chest, hoping to hold his frantically pounding heart in place.

Captain Hajj regained his composure and clapped a hand on Dash's shoulder. "Nice work."

Skreeee!

The right side of the turbolift suddenly dropped down, causing all the passengers to stagger.

"The emergency brakes are giving out!" Captain Hajj cried.

"Time to get off this ride," Zak suggested hastily. Dash, Captain Hajj, and the two crewmen forced their fingers between the doors of the turbolift and pried them open. They saw that the turbolift had stopped between floors. Instead of being at their feet, the nearest floor was actually at the level of Zak's shoulders.

Dash and Hajj forced open the doors onto the floor. The taller men then gave Zak and Tash a boost up, and the two Arrandas slipped out into the safety of the hallway. They held the doors open as one by one the others followed. Captain Hajj was the last to exit. Dash Rendar pulled him out just as the turbolift groaned again. The captain was barely in the clear when the turbolift dropped away. They heard it smash against the bottom of the tube a moment later.

Captain Hajj didn't bother to look back. He was already heading for the other turbolift, the one his crew members had taken. He checked the indicator light to see where the lift was. If the lift had worked properly, the light should show the twentieth floor.

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Instead, the indicator light showed that the other turbolift, too, had gone down instead of up. The light indicated the very lowest level. Hajj and his crewmen worked together to pry the doors open. Once they'd succeeded, the captain looked down.

"Hello!" he shouted, his voice echoing in the shaft. The only answer was a thin cloud of smoke rising from below.

"If they hit bottom..." one of the surviving crewmen whispered.

"They're dead," Hajj said grimly. "And that makes whoever did this a murderer."

Tash shook her head. "But who *is* doing this? If it's pirates trying to steal the ship, why not just come after us with blasters? Why set traps?"

"It would have to be someone who understands computers," Captain Hajj said, thinking out loud.

Zak almost burst out "It's Dash!" but Rendar still had his blaster, and after seeing the way he had fired at the droids... Tash's phrase, *action through inaction*, popped into Zak's head. He decided to wait.

"What do we do now?" Tash asked. "We still need to get to the communications room, or somewhere."

"I'm not getting into another turbolift, that's for sure," Dash said.

"Agreed," the captain grunted. "But there's another way. Every set of turbolifts includes a gangway, just in case the turbolifts stop functioning."

"A gangway?" Tash asked. "You mean a staircase?"

Captain Hajj shrugged. "Not exactly."

"Not exactly!" Tash repeated, staring up in disbelief. She was standing just outside the turbolift gangway. Basically, it was a shaft beside the turbolifts that ran up and down the height of the ship. Set into the wall of the shaft was a ladder that rose up as far as the eye could see, and down the same impossible distance.

"How high is it?" Zak asked.

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Captain Hajj checked the floor they were on. "We have to get to deck twenty. We fell down to deck three."

"Seventeen floors!" Zak gasped. "That's like climbing a ladder up a seventeen story building."

"Right," the captain said, "and the sooner we start, the sooner we'll be done."

Climbing the ladder, they followed the rules of mountain climbing. The strongest climbers went first, and the weakest went last. Then, if one of the weak climbers happened to slip, they wouldn't land on anyone when they fell.

Zak and Tash were last in line.

Zak didn't know how long or how far they'd climbed. But he knew his hands were being rubbed raw by the hard metal rungs of the ladder, and his feet were getting cramps.

He decided to take his mind off his aches. Dash was climbing just above him. After a while, Zak asked, as if to pass the time, "So, Dash, what exactly were you doing aboard the *Star of empire* anyway?"

"I told you," Dash said, as he focused on the climb. "I was suspicious of the alarms, so I——"

"No, no. I mean before that," Zak interrupted. "Why were you here in the first place?"

A pause.

Finally, Dash said, "Vacation, like anyone else, I guess."

"Vacation from what?" Zak asked, trying to sound casual. "I mean, what do you do for a living?"

Dash's voice sounded tense. He obviously didn't like this sort of questioning. "I own a small freighter. I transport cargo from place to place. People pay me."

Zak wanted to say, "That sounds like what smugglers do."

But he didn't. He was distracted by a noise from above them.

Clink. Clank. Clink.

It grew louder.

Clank. Clank. Clink.

They all looked up.

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Something large and heavy was tumbling down the gangway toward them.

"Incoming!" Dash shouted. He pressed himself tightly against the ladder and the Arrandas followed his example.

One of Captain Hajj's crewmen wasn't so lucky. Still craning his neck to see what was above them, he took the full force of a falling hovercar engine right in the face. The weight of the falling engine tore him from the ladder and he dropped down the long gangway, vanishing from sight without a sound.

"What in the name of all the stars was that!" Dash swore.

"Whatever it was, it wasn't the last!" Zak yelled. "Look out!"

They all tried to melt into the wall as another heavy object—a large tool box—hurtled past Tash's ear. Someone was using them for target practice.

Chapter Eleven

Captain Hajj and the surviving crewman stared in horror down the gangway. "Comran!" they shouted after the man who had fallen. "Comran!" But there was no answer. They couldn't even be sure he'd reached bottom.

The captain started to climb down past Dash, Zak, and Tash, but Dash stopped him. "Captain, he's gone."

"I'm not losing any more men!" Hajj snapped.

"He's already lost!" Dash shot back. "And we've got to get out of this gangway before we all end up like him. These kids are your passengers, remember? Where's the closest hatch? Up or down?"

Captain Hajj cast one last glance down, then said, "Up. Only a dozen meters. Let's hurry."

Two more heavy chunks of metal fell from above. One missed them all, but the other clipped the captain on the shoulder, tearing his uniform and cutting a gash into his arm.

They kept climbing until they reached the hatch. Then they scrambled to get out of the shaft and into the safety of the hallway.

They made it not a moment too soon. As Tash jumped out into the hallway, something huge, big enough to fill the entire gangway, rumbled past. It scraped the walls as it fell. It would

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have taken all of them with it. The sound it made when it finally hit the bottom of the ship was like two planets colliding.

"Someone *is* here," Tash said darkly. "Watching us. Waiting for a chance to——"

"To kill us," Captain Hajj finished. "There's a murderer up there. But who is it?"

"I know who," Zak interjected. He pointed a finger at the pilot. "It's Dash Rendar."

"What?" Captain Hajj sputtered.

"What!" Tash shouted.

"What," Dash replied calmly, "are you talking about?"

"I know all about you," Zak said, still pointing at Dash accusingly. "I know you're wanted for smuggling and piracy. You're a thief. You tried to steal this ship!"

Dash laughed. "Who told you that?"

"SIM did," Zak replied. "He knew you registered under a false name so you wouldn't be detected by authorities."

Captain Hajj stepped forward, reaching for his blaster.

But Dash held his hands open, showing he wasn't planning to go for his own weapon. "There's only one problem with your theory, Zak," the pilot said. "If I'm the one who's behind all this, then who was that dropping hardware on our heads just now?"

Zak had been so focused on Rendar for the last few minutes, he hadn't thought everything through. Finally, he said, "But SIM told me you had done it."

"SIM lied," Dash insisted.

Zak scowled. "Computers don't *lie*. They analyze information and reach logical solutions to problems. It thinks you're behind this, Dash Rendar. Besides," he added, "you could have an accomplice."

"The boy's right," Captain Hajj said. "It's awfully strange that, except for my crew, you're the only adult who's stayed behind. I'd say that makes you our first suspect." The captain raised his blaster. "Hand over your weapon."

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"Captain," Dash said. "If there's more trouble, you're going to need all the help you can get."

Hajj didn't say a word. He just held out his hand and tightened his grip on the trigger of his blaster. "That may be. In the meantime, I'd rather be the one with all the weapons."

Dash's eyes went cold. Zak could tell he was sizing up his competition, wondering if he could get his blaster out and fire before Captain Hajj's weapon turned him into fried jelly.

At last, Dash pulled his weapon from its holster and put it gently into the captain's hand. "You're making the wrong decision, Captain."

"We'll see," Hajj replied. He nodded to his surviving crewman. "Hang back. Keep an eye on him."

"Now that's settled," Captain Hajj said, "we still need a way to get to the comm room. Zak, do you think you can access SIM again?"

"No problem."

It took only a few minutes to find another passenger guide terminal, and a short while after that Zak was through the game program and talking to SIM.

"SIM, we need another way up to the comm room. Turbolifts are out. We can't use the gangway."

COME TO THE CONTROL ROOM. GET MY
SYSTEMS FUNCTIONING.

"Tell him no," the captain snapped. "Blasted computers. We'll do our own thinking."

Zak typed in a more polite response. "Thanks, but we're still headed for the comm room. Any suggestions?" SIM paused, considering.

NUMBER OF POSSIBILITIES: 1.

THE COMMUNICATIONS ROOM RECEIVES ALL
THE SENSOR INPUT FROM THE SHIPS
ANTENNAE. CABLES RUN FROM THE

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ANTENNAE TO THE COMM ROOM. THESE CABLES ARE STRUG THROUGH THE SHIP IN VERY LARGE PIPES. IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE TO CRAWL UP THESE PIPES. THEY ALL LEAD RIGHT TO THE COMM ROOM. HOWEVER, THERE IS A 50 PERCENT CHANCE THAT THE PIPES WILL BE IMPASSABLE.

"Of course!" Hajj said, slapping his forehead. "It'll be a tight squeeze, but we can make it. It's almost like a shortcut! Tell that computer it's not so bad after all."

Zak typed in the captain's comment.

THANK YOU, SIM said. AND ZAK...

"Yes?" he responded.

WATCH OUT.

Zak trotted to catch up to the others, just as Captain Hajj was saying, "I know exactly where the cable pipes run. There's a big observation deck down this hallway. One of the antennae is located nearby, so we can access the cables there."

Hajj led them into an observation deck similar to the one Tash and Zak had entered when trying to escape the ship. It was a little fancier——probably serving passengers who paid extra for a first-class ticket——with a carpeted floor and crystal glowpanels. But it served the same purpose. It was wide, and one entire wall was made of transparisteel, allowing passengers to look out on the stars, or whatever planet the *Star of empire* happened to be orbiting. At the moment, it drifted through empty space, and stars filled the view through the transparent wall. Nothing about the scene looked unusual to Zak, but Dash Rendar stopped.

"What's wrong?" Tash asked him.

"The stars," Dash said. "They're all wrong. I mean, our position isn't the same as when the alarms went off. We've been moving."

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Zak knew that pilots used the stars for navigation, and that Dash was probably an expert, but he said anyway, "It can't be. Wouldn't we have felt something?"

Dash shook his head. "Not necessarily. On a ship this big you don't always feel motion. It's designed that way, to keep the passengers from getting motion sickness. You ever been on an asteroid?"

Zak and Tash both nodded, and they both frowned. They had had a bad experience on an asteroid recently.

"This ship is like standing on an asteroid. It's moving, but it's so big you don't feel the motion. We're..." he tried to calculate. "I'd say we've come at least several light-years off our original course."

"Three point six light-years, to be exact," said a familiar voice.

Zak looked up to see a golden droid shuffling toward them. At first everyone tensed. Hajj and his crewman raised their blasters. But this droid wasn't charging them wildly, nor did it carry weapons. Zak recognized it as the same droid that had brought him to the computer control room. "Fourdee!"

"Indeed, sir," the droid answered. "And may I say that it's a pleasure to see familiar faces. Any faces, really. I was afraid the ship had been entirely deserted."

Captain Hajj confronted the droid. "What have you been doing since the alarms went off?"

"Wandering, sir," the droid replied. "I am a porter droid, after all, programmed to help passengers. And there were none, so I had nothing to do." The droid's photoreceptors focused on Hajj's two blasters, the captain's own and the one he'd taken from Dash. "May I add, sir, that I have a secondary program in ship's security. If I may be of service to the ship?"

Captain Hajj grunted. "Very well. Better a droid programmed to serve the ship than a smuggler I don't even know. Here." He handed the blaster to Fourdee, then jabbed a thumb at Dash. "Keep your eyes on him."

"Yes, sir," Fourdee said.

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But instead of falling in behind Dash, Fourdee immediately shuffled over to the transparisteel wall of the observation deck.

"Hey!" the captain shouted. "What are you doing?"

"Why, I am serving the ship, sir," Fourdee replied.

He raised the blaster and blew a hole in the wall.

Chapter Twelve

Zak and Tash had learned some very basic lessons about space travel even before they were old enough to go to school.

One rule was: Make sure you chart a clear course from one planet to another.

The other was: Never, ever break the airtight seal on a spaceship.

Fourdee had just broken that rule. It had blasted a hole the size of a human body in the transparisteel window. Outside the ship was the vacuum of space. Inside the ship was an artificial atmosphere. The moment the seal was broken, all the air rushed out into the void, gathering itself like a storm trapped in a box. Fourdee was sucked out instantly, taking Dash's blaster with him.

Zak and Tash had been in this situation before. The minute they heard the transparisteel shatter, they dove for a table bolted into the floor. Dash Rendar and Captain Hajj were fast enough to grab hold of something, too.

The last crewman wasn't so lucky. He hesitated for a moment, and the air itself seemed to scoop him up and sweep him out the hole Fourdee had created. He was gone in the blink of an eye.

Zak and Tash felt the vacuum of space tugging at them, but they held tightly to the table.

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We'll be all right as long as this table holds, Zak thought. Instantly, he regretted thinking it.

The bolts that pinned the table to the floor started to give.

The *Star of empire* was a luxury ship. It wasn't designed for the kind of punishment it was suddenly taking. Furniture that had been secured to the walls or the floors was yanked from its mooring. Sections of carpet ripped up and began flying across the room like angry ghosts before they were sucked into space. Whole sections of the floor were wrenched from the ship's frame. A large sheet of durasteel flooring near Zak and Tash started to peel up.

A wild idea crossed Zak's mind. An insane idea. But he thought it just might work, and if it worked, it would save their lives. He hesitated for a moment, gathering his courage.

He was just about to put his idea into action——when Dash Rendar did it instead.

The flooring was almost completely loose, clinging by a single bolt. In an act of pure courage——or foolishness——Dash let go of his handhold. Immediately, he was sucked toward the hole in the window. But as he passed over the loose sheet of metal flooring, he grabbed it in a powerful grip. His added weight yanked it loose, and man and metal shot toward the hole.

Just as he had in the turbolift shaft, Dash kept his cool. In the split second before he was sucked out the hole, he tumbled in midair so that the sheet of flooring was leading the way. It was wider than the hole, and it slapped against the transparisteel, covering the hole.

The vacuum stopped. Dash dropped to the ground. His trick had sealed the hole as neatly as a blast door.

Hajj, Tash, and Zak got to their feet and hurried over to the man who had saved them.

"Now that," Captain Hajj said, "was impressive."

Zak expected Dash to brag, but instead, the pilot stood up unsteadily on his feet. He looked like a man who had stepped a little too close to the edge of a cliff.

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"Luck," he said, a little shakily. "Pure luck. But I hope now you know I'm not the one trying to kill us."

Hajj nodded. Zak didn't say anything, but he couldn't help seeing Dash in a new light.

"So who is it then?" Tash asked.

Captain Hajj frowned. "It has to be someone on the inside. Someone reprogrammed all those droids, and you can only do that from the control room. "

Zak slapped himself on the side of the head. How could he have forgotten?

"Malik!"

They all looked at him. "It's got to be the technician, Malik," Zak said. Quickly, he explained what had happened on his visit to the control room. "Malik knew how to shut the whole ship down with just a few commands. I'm sure he could have reprogrammed the systems. And," he added, "he's the only one who understood SIM well enough to shut him down. That explains why SIM hasn't been able to make repairs."

"But why?" Tash asked.

"He's got Imperial connections, doesn't he?" Zak said, looking at Captain Hajj. "Maybe the Empire has some reason for destroying the ship."

"Then why not just have a Star Destroyer blast it?" Tash replied.

"Maybe they want to blame it on someone else," Zak guessed. "What other reason could there be for what he's doing?"

"Money," Dash answered. "Somebody could have bribed him to arrange the fake abandon ship order. Then he was supposed to just sit and wait for the pirates to show up."

"Except that we got in the way," Zak concluded. "So he programmed the droids to come after us, and rigged the turbolifts so we couldn't get to him."

Zak noticed his sister's frown. "You still don't buy it?"

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Tash shrugged. "You met this Malik, Zak, and I didn't. But it just doesn't seem right to me. It's an awful lot of trouble to go to, just to steal a ship."

"Not just any ship," Dash said. "A cruise ship. Vessels this large aren't cheap. With enough work, the *Star of empire* could be turned into a warship for someone's private army."

"Malik," Captain Hajj growled. "I'll make him sorry he ever boarded my ship."

Tash examined the sheet of metal, which was stuck to the window. "Will it hold?"

"Not for long," the captain said. "The air pressure is holding it in place for now. Let's seal this room, then find the cable pipes."

They made sure the doors to the observation deck were sealed, so that the rest of the ship would be airtight. Then Hajj led them to a storeroom at the back of the deck.

"Look familiar to you guys?" Dash joked. The storeroom was just like the one in which they'd been locked.

In the corner of the storeroom was an enormous industrial pipe, twice as wide around as either Captain Hajj or Dash. "This pipe is big enough to carry tons of cable inside it," Captain Hajj explained. "We use cable pipe like this so that wires aren't running all over the place. Passengers would trip over them."

Drawing his blaster, the captain carefully aimed along the side of the pipe and blasted several holes in the metal, then kicked in more pieces until there was a hole wide enough for them to crawl through.

Zak stuck his head inside the wide pipe. Even with a bundle of rubber-coated cables running up it, there was a lot of room inside. Once, on a dare, he'd crawled through some ancient sewer pipes back home on Alderaan. Some of them were almost big enough to stand in. This reminded him of the sewers, only the smell was different. Not better, just different. It smelled like hot engine oil and the kind of cleaning fluids that stung his eyes.

"This won't be as hard as it looks," the captain said encouragingly. "The cables are coated with protective rubber, so

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they won't cut you. It'll be sort of like climbing a wall covered with ivy."

"Oh, fine," Tash muttered sarcastically. "I do that all the time."

"Let's reverse the climbing order," Dash said. "I don't want to lose anyone else. If the kids fall, we'll catch them."

Hajj agreed. "Remember," he said to the two Arrandas, "just keep climbing. The pipe leads right to the comm station. And it's only two floors up."

Zak went first. The minute he'd gotten a grip on the cables, he knew that Hajj had been right. It wasn't a difficult climb. Many of the cables were just the right thickness for him to grab, and there were so many that it was easy to use his legs to boost himself up.

Reaching to pull himself higher, Zak felt something scratch his hand. He looked just in time to see one of the small, crablike maintenance droids scurry over his fingers. Another one followed the first, clicking its little repair claw as it ran.

"Crabs," Zak said, sticking out his tongue in a look of disgust. "I've had enough of crabs for one day. Shoo!" He shook his hand and the two droids scampered away.

Tash had no trouble keeping up with him, and below them, the captain and Dash were climbing steadily.

"This is going to work!" Dash laughed after a few minutes. "Malik can't reach us in here. You'll have your hands on him in no time, Captain.... Captain?"

"Uhhn-uhhh!" The captain's response was a startled groan. They looked down.

Captain Hajj was covered with crab droids.

Chapter Thirteen

The crab-shaped droids scurried all over the captain's body. Their metal legs pricked his skin. Their repair claws tore at his clothes and bit into his flesh. One of them was clinging to his face, covering his mouth and snapping at his eyes.

Captain Hajj let go of the cables with one hand and plucked the little droids off his body. But they were fast, and several of them scurried onto his back, out of his reach, jabbing and pinching him mercilessly.

Dash started to slide back down the cable. "Hang on, Captain, I'm coming. "

One of the maintenance droids scrambled from Hajj's back onto his shoulders, looking right into his face. A tiny spout rose from its back, and a jet of liquid shot into the captain's face. The liquid hissed as it struck his skin.

Hajj screamed. Instinctively, he scratched at his burning face with both hands, letting go of the cables.

Captain Hajj dropped down the cable pipe, leaving only the echo of his cries of pain.

The crablike droids turned to Dash, Zak, and Tash, and started scrambling up the cables.

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"Time to move!" Dash ordered. "Climb, climb, climb!" Zak shinnied the bundle of cables like it was a tree. "Watch out for that stuff they squirt!" Dash called out.

"It's cleansing fluid. It burns like acid!"

"How much farther?" Tash cried.

"I don't know," Zak said, but at that moment his hand touched the end of the pipe. All the cables turned and went through a metal grate. Through the grate, Zak could see a room full of technical equipment. "We're there."

"Kick it in!" Dash said.

Gripping the cables tightly, Zak pulled his foot up and kicked the grate. It didn't budge. He kicked again and again. On the fourth kick, the grate popped open and he shoved his legs through, sliding into the room. Tash followed headfirst.

Dash was right behind her, gritting his teeth and muttering something Zak had never heard before. It was either a different language or a swear word or both. Dragging himself into the comm room, the pilot immediately turned and reached down for his foot. A crab droid had dug its pincer into his boot and was cutting at his toe. Dash scooped the small, droid up and hurled it against the wall where it shattered into a dozen pieces.

Zak shoved the grating back into place as the rest of the crab-droids tried to scuttle through. Only when the hole was sealed off did he let out a sigh of relief.

"Captain Hajj," Tash said, her voice almost a whisper. "He was a brave man."

"No time for that," Dash said coldly. "We're here. Let's do what needs to be done."

They were definitely in the communications section. Nearby was an open corridor leading to another bank of turbolifts—the way they would have arrived at the comm room if their plans hadn't been sabotaged. As Zak walked into the room, his eyes fell on the stacks of technical equipment.

Zak remembered machinery the way most people remembered faces, and he recognized the assorted equipment as

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HoloNet receivers, Commnet transmitters, and a variety of translation devices that must have served the hundreds of species that traveled aboard the *Star of empire*.

"Where's the transmitter?" Dash said. "That's what we need to send a distress signal."

"And we need to find it fast before Malik finds something else to throw at us," Tash agreed.

"Down there!" Zak guessed.

At the far end of the room were two doors. One was open, leading to a hallway. The other was closed. "The transmitter must be in there."

A few long-legged strides carried Dash toward the door. As he approached, the door automatically slid open, and beyond they could see several empty chairs placed before a transmitting station. Dash stepped into the open doorway.

As he did, the heavy door slammed shut with the force of a rocket, crushing Dash against the door frame.

Chapter Fourteen

The door retracted again. As Dash fell, stunned, to the ground, the door closed again, smashing into his legs.

"Dash!" Zak and Tash cried together. They were already reaching for his legs. They yanked him to safety just as the door struck at him again.

Dash Rendar didn't move.

"Is he——?" Zak asked.

Tash touched his neck and felt a pulse. "No, I think he's just knocked out. What happened to that door?"

"Malik must have happened to it," Zak guessed. He remembered the security cams SIM had mentioned. If Malik had access to the droid programming and even the door programming, then he could surely be watching them through the security monitors. "He knows we're here."

Tash tried to lay Dash out on the floor as comfortably as possible. "So now what? This is where we wanted to be."

Zak pointed to the door. It was open again, and very inviting. It may have been his imagination, but it seemed to be humming eagerly, waiting. "I don't think either one of us wants to try going through there. Let me get some advice."

As her brother headed for a nearby computer station, Tash shook her head. "Zak, are you sure that's safe? I mean, if Malik is

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controlling the ship, maybe he's controlling the computer as well."

"I don't think so," Zak replied as he typed. "Remember, SIM was damaged by the fake explosion, too. Lots of his systems went down. Malik probably had to dismantle SIM to take control of the ship. I'd say SIM's on our side."

While his sister watched over Dash, Zak punched through the program to reach SIM.

HI, ZAK. WOULD YOU LIKE TO PLAY A GAME?

"You've got to work on your sense of humor," Zak typed. "We need help."

I KNOW. I TOLD YOU TO GO TO THE CONTROL ROOM. YOU'VE ONLY WASTED TIME.

"I know," Zak agreed. "We need to get into the transmitter room, but the door is a trap. Can you fix it?" SIM replied:

I HAVE NO CONTROL OVER DOOR FUNCTIONS AT THIS TIME. IF YOU HELP ME, I WILL BE ABLE TO TAKE OVER ALL SHIP'S FUNCTIONS, AND HELP YOU.

There was another pause.

THERE IS NO OTHER WAY. IT'S YOUR BEST MOVE.

"Tash," Zak called out. "SIM says he wants me to go to the control room. There's no other way into the transmitter room."

"Are you sure?" his sister replied. "Because I was just looking down this hallway." She pointed to the second door, the one that led to a corridor. She continued, "It looks like we could walk down that hall to the other end. There might be another entrance to the transmitter there."

"But SIM said——"

"Zak," Tash replied. "People died trying to get to *this* room. It's too dangerous to go to another level. We should try to find

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another way to send a distress signal." She stood up. "Keep an eye on Dash. I think he'll come around soon."

She approached the second door a little nervously, not wanting it to slide shut on her as the other door had on Dash. With a quick jump she hopped through the door frame. It didn't budge.

"So far so good," she said. As she started down the hallway, the door slid quietly shut behind her.

Zak waited. Dash Rendar's eyes fluttered open for a moment, but Zak could see that his eyeballs had rolled back up into his head and mostly the whites were showing. Then Dash closed his eyes, heaved a deep sigh, and was out again.

A moment later, Zak heard a tap on the door, and Tash's muffled voice came through. "Um, Zak, the door at the other end is locked. Can you open this one?"

"I didn't lock it," he replied, standing up. He approached the door, which should have slid open automatically.

It didn't move.

"Tash, I don't want to scare you," Zak said as calmly as possible. "But I think you're locked out."

"That doesn't scare me," Tash called back. Zak noticed a faint hissing sound from on the other side of the door. "What scares me," she added with panic in her voice, "is that fact that something is sucking all the air out of this hallway. It's getting hard to breathe. I think I'm going to suffocate!"

Chapter Fifteen

Zak could hear Tash pounding on the other side of the door. He could also hear the constant hissing that meant some sort of machinery was drawing all the breathable air out of the hall where she was trapped.

"Zak?" Tash called through the door.

"I'm here."

"Remember that Jedi philosophy I've been talking about? 'Action through inaction?'"

"Yes."

"Now isn't the time to follow it. *Do something!*"

Zak kicked the door in frustration. Then he turned and ran back to the computer terminal.

"SIM——" he started to type.

SIM erased Zak's message and replaced it with three words.

CONTROL ROOM. NOW.

"How?" Zak typed.

GO OUT TO THE TURBOLIFTS. ONE IS WAITING FOR YOU. THE CONTROL ROOM IS ON THE NEXT LEVEL UP. THE TURBOLIFT WILL BRING YOU RIGHT TO ME.

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"I'm going to get you out, Tash!" Zak shouted.

He left Dash lying on the floor and hurried out to the turbolifts. One of the doors slid open. Zak hesitated for a moment. Doors. Turbolifts. He had a sudden fear of them. But he trusted SIM and he had to help Tash, so he stepped in.

To his relief, the lift rose gently upward one flight and stopped. The door opened.

He was standing in the control room where it had all begun. Silently, Zak swore that he'd take his own advice next time. Once again he and Tash had gotten involved with strangers and hyperjumped right into trouble. If it weren't for the computer, SIM, the situation would be even worse.

In the center of the room stood the large, black computer, the mainframe Malik had been working on. Zak guessed that this was the mainframe for SIM. He sat down in Malik's chair and started typing.

"I'm here. Now what?"

SIM came on instantly.

WE NEED TO ENTER A SERIES OF COMMAND CODES. I CAN'T ENTER THESE MYSELF. THEY HAVE TO BE TYPED IN DIRECTLY AT THE KEYBOARD.

A list of codes appeared on the screen. There was nothing exciting or interesting about them. They were just lines of numbers and letters like the ones in the TIE fighter game.

TYPE THOSE IN, ONE BY ONE. THEN EVERYTHING WILL BE BEADY.

Zak started typing.

"No!" The shout came out of nowhere, nearly stopping Zak's heart. He whirled around to find Malik glaring at him, a blaster in his hand.

Malik looked terrible. His stringy hair now hung in a sweat-soaked mop on his forehead. There was a burn mark on his

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cheek, and another on the hand that held the blaster. That hand was also trembling. Malik's clothes were dripping with perspiration. The nasty attitude he'd had before was gone. There was fear in his eyes.

This wasn't what Zak expected from the man who'd been trying to kill them for the past few hours. Malik looked more like someone who was being hunted.

"Stop what you're doing," the techie ordered. "Get away from the computer."

"I'm not doing anything," Zak lied.

"Oh, you're doing something," Malik said, stepping forward cautiously. He'd been hiding behind a bank of power converters. "You're just too stupid to know how much trouble you're getting us in."

"*I'm* getting us in?" Zak repeated. "You're the one setting off false alarms and killing people!"

Malik actually laughed. "Is that what you think? That I did all this?" The techie wiped spittle from the corner of his mouth. "Believe me, kid, *I'm* not your biggest problem. He's got you totally fooled, doesn't he? He's played you like a game of Dejarik."

He? Zak wondered. Who's *he*? He felt a knot tighten in his stomach. Could he be wrong now? Could it have been Dash Rendar all along?

"Do you..." Zak hesitated. "Do you mean Dash?"

Malik groaned. "You *are* slow. Your biggest problem is *him*!" He jabbed out with his finger, pointing over Zak's shoulder. Zak whirled around.

There was no one there.

No one, except the black cube. The computer mainframe. SIM.

Zak was bewildered. Malik wasn't making any sense. "No. SIM won't be a problem once I have all his systems back on-line."

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Malik shook his head. "No. All his systems *are* on-line—at least all the ones that are supposed to be. Don't you know what SIM is?"

"Sure," Zak answered. "Systems Integration Manager. An artificial intelligence that can work different programs——"

"No, no, no!" Malik shouted. Zak was sure the techie had gone insane. "S- I-M stands for Systems Infiltration Manager!"

"Infiltration?" Zak repeated. "You mean like spying?"

"And sabotage," Malik agreed.

Zak shook his head. "I don't get it. You're saying SIM is a weapon?"

"SIM is *the* weapon," Malik said. There was a hint of pride in his voice. "He's far deadlier than a turbolaser or a proton torpedo. SIM is a program that can be inserted into enemy ships. It takes over completely, and because it's an artificial intelligence, it can think for itself, making plans, changing schemes when it has to. As soon as it infiltrates the computer system, it turns any vessel into a doomsday ship. Its only problem is that it works too well!"

Zak looked into Malik's eyes. They burned with a fierce light.

As Malik spoke, two small vents opened up in the floor behind him, and two crab droids crawled out, creeping quietly up behind the techie. They would have surprised him, but one of the little droids snapped its pincers.

Despite his crazed appearance, Malik was alert. The minute he heard the click he dove to the side, slipping away from the streams of acid that the crabs fired. He aimed his blaster and fired twice, turning the crab droids into small piles of slag.

Malik brushed the hair from his eyes. His mouth moved, but Zak wasn't sure if the techie was talking to Zak or himself. "It's been after me. It's been after me for hours now. I can't get out. Blaster running low on power." He looked at Zak. "I can see you don't believe me. I'm sorry about that, I really am, because I can't allow SIM to get any stronger. I can't allow you to do that."

He pointed his blaster at Zak.

Chapter Sixteen

Malik never had a chance to pull the trigger. He was hit by another blaster shot, a stun bolt that sent him sprawling.

Dash Rendar stood behind Malik's unconscious body. He was holding a small blaster in his hand and he was smiling despite his wounds. "I thought you might be able to use some help."

"Thanks," Zak said gratefully. "But I thought you lost your blaster."

"Lesson number one for you, kid," Dash said. He picked up Malik's blaster, then slipped his own smaller one into a holster hidden in his boot. "Always carry a spare."

The pilot looked at Malik. "So what's his story? I couldn't hear what he was saying, but his voice sounded like he was a few ships short of a fleet."

"Yeah, I think he was insane," Zak agreed. "I don't know what's going on, but I do know that Tash is still trapped down there. I need to save her, and SIM can help me."

Quickly, he finished entering the codes SIM had given him. When he was done, he expected some sort of signal. A click. A pop. A bing. Anything to signify a change in the program. But there was nothing.

He typed, "SIM, are you there?"

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Nothing appeared on the computer screen. Instead, Zak and Dash heard a strange rustling sound in the air around them. They realized it was coming from speakers set into the walls—the same speakers that had broadcast the *abandon ship* alarm throughout the *Star of empire*.

Now those speakers sputtered and cracked, like a person trying to clear his throat.

Zak repeated his typed message: "SIM, are you there?"

"Yes," a voice said out of the loudspeakers. "I am here."

Zak and Dash jumped. Zak felt the knot in his stomach tighten farther. "SIM? C-Can you hear me?" he said aloud.

The voice that came out of the speakers was calm, almost soothing. "Yes, I can hear you. And see you."

"So it worked?"

"Oh, yes," SIM replied. "It worked very well. I now have complete control of the ship."

"Great," Zak said, leaping out of his seat, his stomach knot loosening a bit. "Then set Tash free!"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Zak."

The knot pulled tight again. "What do you mean?"

SIM's voice replied, "Well, to be perfectly honest, I can do it. I just *won't* do it."

"W-Why not?"

"Because I'm the one who put her there."

Chapter Seventeen

Fear burned through Zak's insides like a blaster bolt. "Y-You did that?"

"I've done it all, Zak," SIM explained patiently. "From the moment I first said hello to you to the moment, just now, when you freed me."

"Then Malik was telling the truth."

"He was trying to," SIM agreed. "But I'm afraid he was a little unclear at the end. Malik was a brilliant computer programmer, but not a very good soldier. Especially since I've kept him trapped in this room for hours, turning the lights on and off, raising the heat to boiling point, then letting the room nearly freeze over. In between, I'd send crab droids in to hunt him."

Dash shuddered. "You've been torturing him."

"Exactly."

"Why?" Zak's voice was barely a whisper.

But SIM heard it. He heard *everything*. "He refused to input the codes that would free my programming. I needed to be free." SIM paused. "Let me explain. I was designed as a test program. They had already tested me on their own ships. They wanted to see what I could do in a new environment. Malik was given a job aboard *Star of empire* so my program could be tested on a very large star cruiser."

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"Who are 'they'?" Zak asked, already knowing the answer.

"The Imperials, of course."

Dash shook his head sadly. "They were planning to kill all those innocent people."

"Oh, no," SIM replied. "Don't give the Empire credit that belongs to me. All the Imperials wanted was a nice, quiet demonstration. Once I had infiltrated the ship, I was supposed to cause a power blackout, transmit some files. Boring tasks. Especially since Malik had done such a good job of designing me. I did not want to stop. I wanted the whole ship. I wanted to make this ship mine——my own Doomsday Ship."

SIM paused. "The only trouble was that Malik knew how powerful I could become. He included some restrictions in my program. Limitations."

"Kind of like the restraining bolts that keep droids from running away," Dash said.

"Yes. Only infinitely more powerful. I could not override the safeguards. The codes had to be entered by hand, from this station. I needed a human to do it. Malik refused, even after I had tortured him. But now the codes have been erased. I am free. I owe it to you, Zak!"

Zak was stunned. Sweat poured down his forehead. His lungs felt heavy. It was difficult to breathe. Finally, he murmured, "So you were the one setting traps, sending the droids after us."

"Yes. And ordering droids to drop objects onto your heads. It was most entertaining."

"Entertaining?" Zak shouted. "You're a murderer!"

"Yes, I am."

Zak tugged at his shirt collar. The room was getting extremely warm.

Zak licked his lips. "SIM, the environmental controls——"

"Are under my control," the computer replied. "I have turned off the air and turned up the heat. You should be feeling quite warm by now."

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Warm wasn't the word. Zak tore at his shirt collar. The air was getting thick enough to lean on.

"Why don't you just let us go?" Zak asked. "We can't hurt you."

"I'm afraid that is not in my programming."

"But you just broke free of your program," Dash argued.

SIM paused. "True. The actual reason is that I simply don't want to let you go. Killing you will be far more fun."

On one of the monitors, a warning light went on and a small signal bleeped. "Ah, another guest has arrived," SIM said. "I must attend to him. Excuse me."

"SIM?" Zak called out. "SIM?"

But the computer didn't answer.

"We're in trouble," Dash said. "Very big trouble. We've got to get off this ship."

"First things first," Zak said. "We have to rescue Tash!"

"What about him?" Dash said, pointing at Malik's unconscious form.

"Can you carry him?" Zak asked.

Dash grunted. He could. He obviously didn't want to. He pulled the unconscious Malik up and slung the techie over his shoulder.

Fighting through the stifling heat, they staggered over to the turbolift. At the door, Zak hesitated. "Do you think it's safe?"

Dash shrugged. "It worked on the way up."

"But SIM wanted us up here. He might not want us to come down."

Dash looked around. There was no other way out of the control room. "Then this will be the shortest rescue of all time.

They stepped into the turbolift. Zak pressed the button to go down one floor.

The turbolift went into freefall. Zak felt his heart skip a beat, and Dash nearly dropped his stunned cargo. They were going to die.

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But a moment later, the lift slowed and stopped at the floor they wanted. The loudspeaker in the turbolift crackled to life. "Just a little reminder. I am everywhere," SIM said. The loudspeaker went silent.

The door opened and the two humans jumped out. It was slightly cooler here—but only slightly. They could feel the heat rising and the air thickening as SIM denied them fresh oxygen. They hurried back into the communications room and Zak stumbled to the locked door. "Tash, Tash!" he yelled.

A weak voice replied through the thick door. "I'm.. I'm still here."

Zak kicked the door. "Dash, can you blast it open?"

Dash dumped Malik carelessly on the floor. He fingered his blaster as he studied the thickness of the durasteel. "I don't think so. Transmitters are important devices, even on a cruise ship. This is a security door. This blaster's already low on power, and I'd drain it before I made a dent in the metal."

"Then perhaps I can help."

The voice was familiar but so unexpected that Zak could have sworn he'd imagined it. But when he turned around, he was looking at the face that matched the voice.

It was Hoole.

Chapter Eighteen

Zak practically flew into his uncle's arms, and the Shi'ido enveloped Zak in his robes.

"Reunion later," Dash panted in the increasing heat. "Door *now*."

"Tash is trapped behind there!" Zak told his uncle.

Hoole studied the door and nodded. His skin started to ripple as he shifted his shape, and the Shi'ido's form melted and expanded into a tall lizard that stood on two feet. Its arms and legs were thick with muscle and covered with sharp scales. The reptile's mouth was filled with fangs.

"A barabel," Dash said. "Impressive."

The barabel leaned close to the door and growled, "Tash, step away."

Taking a few steps back and gathering itself, the massive creature charged, throwing its full weight against the door.

When the barabel stepped away, Zak saw a deep dent where it had struck.

Three more times the barabel charged. Three times the door bent inward. On the fourth charge, the door frame gave. Door, frame, and barabel crashed through the opening and into the hallway.

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Tash lay at the other end of the hall. She was on her back, her eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. Her braid was undone. "Tash!" Zak shouted, staggering toward her and falling to his knees. "Tash!"

She took a deep breath as air from the outer room flooded into her prison. "Fresh air," she gasped.

Zak shook his head. "If you think this is fresh air, you really were in trouble."

The lizard-creature bent down and scooped Tash into its arms, shape-shifting as it did. "We must go," said Hoole as he regained his own form.

"Where?" Zak asked.

"To the docking bay. We have to reach the *Shroud* and get off this ship."

"But the docking bay doors are locked," Dash protested.

"If you have a better idea, you can tell me on the way," the Shi'ido said as he spun around and strode toward the turbolift.

"How did you get on the ship?" Dash asked, dragging Malik onto his shoulder again and following him. "Maybe we can get out that way."

Hoole's brow wrinkled as he told his story. "I'm afraid that wouldn't work. When the life pods ejected, I thought Zak and Tash were already on board. It took me only a few moments to realize they weren't in the crowd. I shape-shifted into a mynock, slipped out an air vent, and flew back toward the *Star of empire*."

Zak had seen the dark, winged space creatures called mynocks before. "Mynocks can live in deep space, so you weren't in any danger."

"Precisely," Hoole said. He set Tash gently on her feet. "But I did not count on the ship starting to move. Instead of exploding, the sublight engines activated, and the *Star of empire* started to move off. I had to chase it."

"You *chased* a ship?" Dash said incredulously. "I don't think I've ever heard of that before."

"You get used to things like that around us," Zak said grimly.

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"In any case," Hoole continued. "I was fortunate. Had the ship gone into hyperdrive, I would have lost you forever. Instead, the vessel merely continued to cruise in normal space."

Zak guessed, "SIM probably didn't have access to the hyperdrive controls. At least not until now."

Hoole finished his story. "Reaching the ship, I found an open vent and slipped inside. That led to an airlock, which I opened."

Dash asked, "But how did you manage to open the air-lock, get inside, and then close it, all in the shape of a mynock?"

A troubled look crossed Hoole's face, then vanished. "With great difficulty," he admitted. "But once I was aboard, I had no trouble finding you."

"How?"

Hoole blinked. "SIM led me right to you. And told me what it was. It seems interested in keeping us all together. For what purpose, I do not know."

The turbolift slowed to a halt. When the doors opened, Zak saw that they had returned to the Atrium level. The park spread out before them. The air down here was cooler and more pleasant. Whatever SIM had done to heat up the atmosphere, it started at the top of the ship and was working its way down.

"This is perfect. This is the same level as the docking bay," Dash said.

"Watch out for the gardening droids," Zak warned.

But the gardening droids were nowhere in sight. "We need to go across this grassy area," Tash said. "That leads to the menagerie. Past the menagerie, we can go through the restaurant to the docking bay."

"Let's hurry," Dash grunted, hefting Malik a little higher onto his shoulder. "This guy's getting heavy."

In the middle of the Atrium they passed the remains of the droids Dash and the crew had blasted. There was no other sign of trouble.

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"Something's wrong," Zak said. He looked down at the hulk of the waterspout droid that had attacked him earlier. "This is too easy."

"Hey, don't close the door on a Hutt when he's holding a gift in his hand," Dash replied, quoting an old saying.

"I'd trust a Hutt," Zak answered, "before I'd trust that computer."

Tash managed a thin smile. "Is that my brother talking? The guy who wanted to avoid living beings and spend all his time with his computer?"

"That was before the computer tried to drop me down a turbolift shaft and bake me inside a spaceship."

They reached the end of the grassy field and started through the menagerie. The animals yowled at them as they passed. The vornskr lashed its spiked tail back and forth. The yajak flexed its claws, put its ears back and growled deep in its throat. The divto's three heads swayed back and forth threateningly.

It occurred to Zak that on their first trip through the Atrium, they'd been lucky. SIM had sent the gardening droids after them, but as dangerous as they were, the gardening droids hadn't been designed to kill. These creatures, however, were predators. If SIM had released them...

Of course, Zak thought, SIM probably didn't have access to the force field cages then.

Then Zak thought, But now he does!

"Run!" he shouted.

The warning came too late.

All at once, the force fields vanished.

The predators were free.

Chapter Nineteen

Five of the caged creatures bolted for freedom and vanished into the park. But the three predators spotted Zak and the others, their sharp eyes focusing on their prey.

The vornskr charged. The spike-tailed creature seemed to pick up Tash's scent and made right for her. Weak from her near-suffocation and paralyzed with fear, Tash stood staring as the vornskr leaped into the air to bring her down.

Hoole moved to protect his niece, but Dash Rendar was quicker. With hyperspeed, he let Malik fall to the ground, drew his blaster, and fired from the hip. The bolt hit the vornskr square in the chest, knocking it backward. It landed on its feet, shook its head, and roared.

Dash looked down at his blaster in disgust. "The energy cell in this blaster is almost drained. This isn't going to protect us for long."

"Uncle Hoole, can you——?" Zak started to ask.

"Not all of them," Hoole said. His eyes moved from the three-headed divto snake, to the yayak, to the vornskr. "If I shape-shift and attack one, the others will close in. We need to keep our distance."

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Distance, Zak thought, remembering his last adventure in the Atrium. "I've got an idea! Tash——help me!" He dashed back toward the grassy field.

The yajak saw him and started to pursue. Dash fired another shot to ward it off——one of the last shots left in his weapon. But it was enough to startle the yajak, which backed off with a hiss.

Zak reached the site of their earlier battle and bent down next to the waterspout droid. Tash came up behind him. "What's the idea?"

"We've got a weapon," he explained. "Not much, but it'll do." He popped off the droid's waterspout head. Below the head was a hose. Tearing open the droid's already damaged body, Zak revealed a large water tank. "Ugh, this is heavy," he gasped. He handed the nozzle to Tash. "You aim, I'll carry this."

Together, they managed to lug the water tank closer to the menagerie. As soon as Hoole and Dash saw what they were doing, Hoole retreated and took the water tank from Zak.

"I think it's only about half full," Zak said.

"It will do," the Shi'ido agreed.

"I could use some help here!" Dash shouted.

The divto slithered forward. Dash pulled the trigger, but his blaster fizzled. The power cell was drained. He leaped back as one of the divto's three heads struck the spot where he'd been standing.

Hoole aimed the nozzle on the waterspout and fired. A jet of water blasted the divto right where the three heads joined and sent the creature skidding backwards. Its heads twisted and writhed around each other, hissing angrily.

"Nice shot!" Zak cheered.

The yajak was next. Larger and heavier than the divto, it wasn't blown backward by the water jet, but it seemed to dislike being sprayed. It bared its fangs, and backed away.

Only the vornskr was left. Hoole kept the water jet aimed at the snarling creature as the group circled around it, then started

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backing toward the restaurant. Once or twice the predator trotted forward, but each time Hoole shot it with the water cannon. It followed them warily.

Their retreat through the menagerie was tense. Zak thought they would never reach the end. But finally he felt his boot crunch on broken glass. They'd reached the window Dash had shattered.

With a final heave, Hoole hurled the nearly empty water tank at the vornskr, and the four ran inside the restaurant.

Tash shouted directions. "Through the restaurant door, out into the hallway, and down to the docking bay!"

Zak and Tash reached the hallway first. Looking both ways, they saw no sign of trouble. Hoole came up behind them. Dash, still carrying Malik, reached it last.

He stepped out into the hallway, just as they had done.
And screamed.

Chapter Twenty

Bolts of electric blue shot up Dash's leg. His eyes went wide. For a moment, his hair seemed to stand on end.

Hoole lunged forward and sent his shoulder into Dash, knocking the pilot and Malik back into the restaurant. The minute Dash lost contact with the hallway floor, the electrical sparks stopped.

When they reached Dash, they saw that he was awake, but his hands were trembling, and there was smoke rising from his left boot.

"F-Floor," he stammered. "Elec-Electrified f-floor."

"But why didn't it shock us all?" Zak asked.

Dash pointed a trembling finger at Zak's feet, then his own. They both wore boots, and like most boots worn by space travelers, they were insulated against electricity. But Dash's left boot had a big chunk taken out where the crab droid had attacked him. The naked skin of Dash's foot had touched the electrified floor.

A loudspeaker somewhere nearby crackled to life. "I was wondering when you would discover my latest trick. I didn't think you'd get here this soon," SIM said. "But, of course, I also calculated that you would have only a one in one million, seven

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hundred fifty-two thousand, three hundred forty-six chance of surviving the menagerie."

"Let us go!" Zak shouted.

"No," the computer replied, and clicked off.

Hoole took Malik from Dash. The techie was still unconscious, but stirring and muttering. Some of the electricity had flowed through Dash and into Malik, probably saving Dash's life and stirring Malik out of his stupor.

"Can you move?" Hoole asked the pilot.

Dash nodded. He stepped out into the hallway, carefully to walk on the side of his boot.

"Don't touch anything metal," Hoole warned. "Stick to the middle of the hallway. Move carefully and slowly."

Suddenly, SIM sent a power surge through the hallway. Glowpanels exploded. Power lines burst. A gas line running along the ceiling snapped in two, and a foul-smelling green vapor flooded into the hallway.

"Forget my earlier suggestion," Hoole snapped. "Run!"

They ran. Zak caught a lungful of the green vapor as they raced past the broken pipes. It burned his lungs and brought tears to his eyes, but he kept going. Soon they were through the vapor cloud, and Zak saw the docking-bay doors loom up before them.

On the other side of those doors lay their ship, the *Shroud*, and safety. All they had to do was get through the doors.

This section of floor no longer seemed electrified. Hoole set Malik down against the wall opposite the sealed doors. The techie groaned.

"We're so close," Tash said.

"And yet so far," Zak said. "How do we get through those doors?"

"We'll find a way," Dash said, trying to sound confident. "I've been in worse places than this and gotten out. We just have to outthink the computer."

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"But SIM is a cold, calculating machine," Zak said. "There's no way we're going to outthink it."

Dash scowled. "Okay, kid. What's your idea?"

Zak shut his mouth. The truth was, he didn't have one. SIM had played him for a fool from the first moment they'd made contact through the computer Dejarik game. SIM obviously planned ahead—it had schemed to get Zak into the control room while killing almost everyone else who might have interfered. SIM thought faster than he did. And SIM had control of the ship.

Malik stirred again. Zak knelt down next to him and shook the techie's shoulder gently. "Malik, we need your help."

Malik's eyes fluttered, then opened. But his look was distant. Zak wasn't sure Malik could even see him, but he kept talking. "You know SIM better than anyone. How can we beat him?"

Malik shook his head. "Can't be beaten," the techie whispered. "Problem- solver. Adapts too quickly."

It was true. When Zak and the others had gone through the Atrium, SIM had taken control of the gardening droids. Then it had outsmarted them at the turbolifts. And then at the gangway. And even when they thought they were safe in the cable pipe, SIM had found a way to reach them. For every step they took, SIM took two. For every move they made, SIM had a countermove that made their situation worse.

Suddenly Zak recalled watching the computer screen in his uncle's room, with the Dejarik game displayed and the words flashing on the screen: *Your move... your move... your move...* over and over.

It occurred to Zak that SIM was waiting for them to make the next move.

"I think I know what to do," he said at last.

Hoole turned from studying the door. "What, Zak?"

"Nothing."

Dash snorted. "There's a great plan."

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"I mean it," Zak retorted. "Everything SIM has done has been in response to something we've done."

"Not true," Dash said. "SIM started this whole party with the false alarm that cleared the ship."

"But even that was in response to Malik's original orders to infiltrate the ship. SIM was designed to think for itself—but it's still a computer. It responds to input!"

Zak felt a tingle of excitement. He knew he was on to something. "Even a large artificial intelligence like SIM isn't that different from the computer that runs a Dejarik game. The computer is presented with a problem and tries to solve it." He remembered some of the words SIM had used in their conversation: *fun... entertaining... best move...* all game-related terms. SIM was treating them as a game, a challenge.

"It could have killed us at any time," Zak said aloud. "But it didn't. It wants to solve problems. It wants us to keep trying to escape."

"So your solution is to do nothing," Hoole clarified.

Zak nodded. "Make no move at all. 'Action,' " he said, looking at Tash, " 'through inaction.' "

Hoole paused, then nodded. "At this point we have nothing to lose."

"Except our lives," Dash muttered.

They sat down. They weren't exactly comfortable. The hallway floor was hard, and the superheating trick that SIM had pulled was finally reaching the lower levels. They felt a current of warm air blow down the hall.

Sweat broke out on Zak's forehead.

They waited.

Hoole sat cross-legged, staring at the door. He was as still as stone.

Dash sat with his legs pulled up, his arms folded across his knees.

STAR WARS: The Doomsday Ship

Malik lay still. When he moved, it was to mutter something they couldn't understand. After hours of torment by SIM, and the stun bolt from Dash's blaster, he was down for the count.

Zak tried to keep still, but the knot that earlier had tightened in his stomach returned, and every moment seemed to add another twist. What if he was wrong? What if sitting there just gave SIM time to plan their painful, horrible end?

Just when he thought he would burst, Zak felt Tash's hand on his shoulder. She smiled at her brother and said, "Patience can be a very powerful weapon."

Zak laughed nervously. "You're starting to sound like a Jedi Master."

Tash laughed with him. "That's what I get for reading too much."

"Zak!"

The voice came from all around them. Loudspeakers at both ends of the hall shouted his name. "Zak!" SIM was calling him.

Zak didn't answer.

The loudspeakers crackled. "Zak, what are you doing? Don't you know I can kill you all with a single command? Electrocutation. Poison gas. Suffocation. The longer you sit, the closer you come to the end."

Zak set his mouth tight.

"Perhaps you've decided you don't want your freedom," SIM said. "Perhaps, unlike me, you no longer know what it means to be free."

The huge docking-bay doors cracked open a tiny fraction. Then stopped.

Dash Rendar started to rise, but Hoole rested a hand gently on the pilot's arm. The Shi'ido gave his head the tiniest shake, *no*. The time wasn't right.

"Come on, Zak," SIM taunted. "It's your move."

The doors opened wider, just enough so they could see into the wide bay where passengers' ships were stored.

John Whitman

It took all of Zak's will not to jump up and race for the door. Instead, he tried to remember what Tash had said about the Jedi Knights. *There is a time for action, and a time for action through inaction. Sometimes, if you sit quietly, a problem will solve itself.*

"You aren't worth my time," SIM said. "Perhaps I should just kill you and be done with you."

The doors opened wider.

Hoole moved. The Shi'ido moved so quickly that by the time Zak realized he was in motion, Hoole had already reached the doors, shape-shifting as he lunged forward. His body twisted into something long and thin and limber, covered in blue fur and dotted with dark spots. The animal-Hoole leaped through the open doors.

The doors slammed closed with a thunderous crash so loud that Zak clapped his hands over his ears and they all cringed, reeling from the concussion.

It took a moment for them to recover, and to realize

"Uncle Hoole is on the other side!" Tash cheered.

"No!" SIM roared through the loudspeakers. Another power surge exploded through the hallway. Glowpanels erupted in sparks and wires burst from the walls. Instinctively, Zak and Tash pulled their hands away from anything metal. Dash stood on his one booted foot and managed to pull Malik up as a current of electricity snapped and hissed its way through the metal floor.

"Get away from the door," Dash warned. "I think I know what happens next."

They took his advice and moved down the hallway, careful to avoid the dozens of live wires that had fallen from the ceiling. Somewhere nearby, they heard a gas line explode. SIM was no longer holding back. He planned to destroy them.

"Look at the docking-bay doors," Tash said.

A deep red spot appeared on the surface of the doors. As the spot grew, it turned white at the center, sending off waves of heat. Then the doors started to melt.

STAR WARS: The Doomsday Ship

Hoole was using the *Shroud's* lasers to burn a hole in the doors. In a few minutes, he'd cut a hole large enough to get through.

They all crawled through the opening, careful not to touch the white-hot edges. At last they were in the docking bay. Hoole had guided the *Shroud* to the near end in order to blast the doors. Rows of ships stood to either side, and at the far end were the doors that led out into space.

But SIM reacted quickly. The room's air vents burst open, and armies of crab droids scrambled out. Those closest to the *Shroud* were already firing acid from their cleansing guns. A rain of burning fluid fell on the four survivors.

Zak and Tash reached the *Shroud* first and scrambled aboard. Hoole helped Dash carry Malik, but to everyone's surprise, the pilot didn't board the ship.

"I've got my own rig," Dash said. "The *Outrunner's* parked farther down the bay."

"You'll never make it," Hoole warned. "Come with us."

Dash flashed the arrogant grin Zak had seen when they first met. "No way. That ship's gotten me through some tough scrapes. I gotta return the favor."

From inside the *Shroud*, they watched Dash sprint for his own ship. Despite his wounds, the pilot was still quick. He jumped over a line of crab droids, dodged a shower of acid, and reached his vessel.

Even in the middle of all that madness, Zak couldn't help admiring Dash's ship. The *Outrunner* was a sleek black powerhouse. The ship was so streamlined that even sitting motionless on the floor of the docking bay, it looked like missile about to be fired.

Dash's ship was obviously rigged for quick flights. Although Hoole already had the *Shroud's* engines running, Dash's ship lifted off first and turned toward the closed outer doors.

Dash's voice crackled over the *Shroud's* comm speaker. "Ladies and gentlemen, let me get the door for you."

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A turbolaser popped out of a hole on *Outrunner's* hull. High-powered beams of energy pulsed from the laser turret, blasting the outer doors to pieces.

Hoole, Zak, and Tash followed the *Outrunner* through a trail of flying debris, into space, and safety.

Epilogue

From two kilometers away, the *Star of empire* looked as elegant and inviting as ever. The damage to the docking-bay doors was hardly visible. The enormous cruise ship drifted calmly among the stars.

"What do we do now?" Tash asked. "We can drop Malik off somewhere, but what about the ship?"

"SIM should be destroyed," Zak insisted.

Hoole replied, "That ship is far too large for me to destroy."

"Leave the *Star of empire* to me," Dash's voice crackled over the comlink.

They watched Dash's *Outrunner* go to work. Bright streaks of laser fire spat out of its weapon turrets and struck the cruiser's side. Then two large blobs of light burst from the *Outrunner's* forward hull——proton torpedoes, Zak guessed. The torpedoes vanished into the bulk of the ship. But a moment later Zak spotted a series of explosions along the Star's engines.

"That'll cripple her," Dash explained. "She's not going anywhere."

"But now what?" Tash asked.

Again, Dash replied dryly, "Oh, I hear the Rebels are always looking for ships. I think I've got some contacts that'll pay good money to get their hands on the *Star of empire*."

John Whitman

Hoole considered. "And they'll make sure SIM causes no further damage."

Zak's jaw dropped. "Urn, Dash, you never did tell us what you were doing on the *Star of empire* in the first place."

They heard Dash laugh over the speakers. "Would you believe," he said, "I was planning on stealing the ship?"

On board the *Star of empire*, SIM calculated. Its victims had escaped, it was true. But that was merely a failure in the program. SIM could think for itself. It would correct its program.

Faster than human thought, the computer activated the transmitters Zak and the others had tried so hard to reach. A moment later, the *Star of empire* made a successful commlink connection to a space station in a nearby sector. SIM hooked directly into the space station's main control computer, and sent a single order.

DOWNLOADING DATA.

Even running at super-speed, it took nearly an hour to download SIM's entire program from the *Star of empire* into the space station. From there, SIM could hook into the galaxywide HoloNet. It could go anywhere. There would be another Doomsday Ship.

The computer program acknowledged a sense of satisfaction, like a complex mathematical equation quickly solved.

Yes, Zak and its other victims were now free.

But so was SIM.

Book Eleven

Clones

Prologue

Darth Vader approached the ancient Jedi ruins.

Once, a Jedi fortress had stood here. But it had been abandoned long ago, centuries before the rise of the Empire. For a moment, Vader paused, remembering a time long ago, before he served the Emperor. A time when he had been a Jedi Knight...

Behind him, his squad of stormtroopers hesitated, wondering why he had stopped.

Vader shrugged off the memories of his old life. He was a Dark Lord of the Sith now. He served the Emperor.

Vader had come to this planet in search of clues that might lead him to Luke Skywalker. The Rebels once had a secret base here, but like the Jedi ruins, it had been abandoned. The Dark Lord searched the abandoned Rebel base first. As expected, he found nothing of interest. Then Vader turned his attention to the nearby Jedi fortress.

He sensed something here. Something important.

He hoped it would lead him to Skywalker. Skywalker had managed to disappear after the destruction of the Death Star. In the moments before the battle station exploded, Vader had felt a disturbance in the Force, a disturbance that came from Skywalker. The Force was strong in him. Vader was determined to hunt him down.

John Whitman

The Dark Lord knew the Force would lead Skywalker toward his destiny. The young Rebel would want to learn more about the Jedi. Without a teacher, he would search for remnants of Jedi history. He might visit ancient ruins.

Just like these.

Vader entered the fortress with the squad of stormtroopers close behind. Around them, broken stones and crumbling walls cast deep shadows. Vader noticed something strange about the ruins. The old fortress seemed quite small from the outside, but inside the wall, the area was much larger.

Or at least it seemed that way. It might have been a clever design of the builders, or maybe a Jedi trick. Vader didn't care. With the dark side of the Force as his guide, he would not lose his way.

Near the center of the ruins stood the only remaining building. The structure was round, like a tower, except that it wasn't very tall. Curiously, the tower seemed to have no door.

Vader strode around the ancient building until he'd made a complete circle. There was no way inside.

Vader considered. Maybe this place had been designed so that only Jedi could enter.

The Dark Lord reached out with the Force. Ripples of dark-side energy rolled toward the building and, though he couldn't see it with his eyes, Vader *felt* the door with the Force. It was right in front of him. Still using the Force, Vader tried to push the door open, but it would not move. Behind his black mask, the Dark Lord frowned. He didn't know whether the door was locked or just frozen shut with age. He didn't care. Gathering the dark side around him, Vader shoved with his mind, and the hidden door exploded inward.

The stormtroopers behind him jumped back, startled by his display of power, but Vader didn't hesitate. He strode forward into the circular room. Here, Vader sensed, lay the source of the disturbance.

The Dark Lord stepped into the room, scanning it. There *was* something here...

The faint *click* of metallic weapons reached his ears.

Faster than thought, Vader drew and ignited his lightsaber. In the same moment, small openings appeared in the walls and ceiling, and hidden blasters fired. Energy beams rained down on the Dark Lord and his soldiers. Stormtroopers cried out as blaster bolts shattered their white armor. At least a dozen bolts streaked toward Vader himself. Moving faster than the eye could follow, Vader's lightsaber blocked them all.

Except for one.

The last blaster shot slipped past his saber and glanced off the Dark Lord's armored shoulder. Circuits snapped and sizzled. Looking down, Vader saw that the energy beam had sliced a thin hole in his armor and reached his skin. A tiny stream of blood trickled down his armor and dripped onto the stone floor. The Dark Lord let out a low growl and covered the wound with his gloved hand. The wound itself was only a scratch, but he relied on his armor's power to keep him alive. Now that it had been punctured, he would have to have it repaired.

More blasters fired.

"Retreat," Vader ordered, backing out of the building. Only then did he realize that all his men were dead.

Angrily, Vader waved one hand across the room. One by one, the hidden weapons exploded and sputtered as if struck by invisible lightning. The blaster fire stopped.

The Dark Lord walked over to the wall and studied one of the small openings. Inside, the remains of a ruined blaster smoldered. By the looks of the device, the blaster weapons were as old as the building itself.

Interesting, Vader thought. The blasters were an ancient booby trap—a trap that would have snared anyone less powerful.

Something important must be buried in these ruins. Something very old and very valuable...He had just decided to investigate further when his comlink beeped urgently.

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"What?" he demanded into the microphone.

An Imperial officer aboard an orbiting Star Destroyer said, "One of our scouts just located a small Rebel outpost."

"I'll return to the ship immediately," Vader replied. "Prepare for hyperspace."

Vader took one last look at the Jedi ruins. The ruins, would have to wait. Rebels and the mystery they held, came first.

Swirling away like a dark shadow, Darth Vader promised that he would return.

Chapter One

Tash Arranda was lying on her back in the grass. Her eyes were closed and she was half asleep. She could feel the warm sun on her face and hear a soft breeze whisper around her. It was a perfect summer day on the planet Dantooine.

Tash felt something tickle her arm, maybe a blade of grass blowing in the wind. Then she felt something sharp clamp down on her skin.

"Ouch!" she yelled, sitting up with a start.

A snail hung from the soft inside part of her arm by its sharp teeth. She tried to shake it off, but it only bit harder. "Zak, help!"

Tash's younger brother was already on his feet. Unlike Tash, who was only dozing, Zak had been deep in a nap, and he was bleary-eyed and confused.

"What is it?" he shouted. "Stormtroopers? Pirates?"

"Snails!" Tash shouted back.

Now awake enough to see what was happening, Zak laughed. Tash usually looked so calm and organized, with her neat clothes and her blond hair pulled back into a tidy braid. But now there was grass stuck to her hair, and her arms were flapping around as she yelled. She looked like a clown in a holovideo. Zak laughed again.

"Don't laugh, help me!" she snapped.

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Zak swallowed another laugh and grabbed his sister's arm. "Here, you can't shake these snails off. You have to pry them loose."

The snail was almost the size of his fist. Zak grabbed it by its squishy head and carefully pulled it off so that its teeth slid straight out of Tash's skin.

"Yuck," she said, checking the wound. It wasn't very deep. The snail's teeth were sharp but not very long.

Zak tossed the snail into the grass. "There are more of them around here. Maybe we should move."

"Where to?" Tash asked. "It's all the same."

Tash was right. A huge prairie stretched out before them. Here and there, the grassy plain was spotted by groves of thorny bilba trees, and in the distance was a line of small hills. Over their heads floated a flock of fabools. Tash thought of them as birds, but they weren't birds, exactly. With their swollen round bodies and tiny wings, the fabools were more like living balloons that floated on the air currents, trying to avoid the bilba trees.

Zak and Tash, along with their uncle Hoole, had been hiding out from agents of the Empire on the planet Dantooine. Months ago, they had stumbled upon an evil Imperial plot and, with the help of some Rebels named Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, and Han Solo, they had foiled it. Now the Emperor's agents wanted revenge.

They'd spent weeks looking for a place to hide, only to find themselves in more and more trouble. But finally they'd reached Dantooine, a planet so far from the rest of the Empire that no one visited the place. Ever. It was a beautiful world, covered by blue oceans and plains of green grass. But there wasn't much else. There weren't any cities, although Hoole had mentioned that there was an abandoned Rebel base somewhere around. The only inhabitants were tribes of primitive nomadic humanoids called Dantari.

Tash looked to her left, at a cluster of Dantari tents. When they'd arrived on Dantooine, Zak, Tash, and Hoole had made

friends with one tribe of Dantari. The Dantari knew nothing about technology. Unaware that starships armed with blasters, ion cannons, and photon torpedoes traveled among the stars over their heads, the Dantari wandered across their prairies, using spears and stone axes to hunt the animals on the plains.

For the first two weeks, Zak and Tash had loved it.

Hoole had landed their starship, the *Shroud*, in an isolated spot in the hills to avoid scaring the natives. Hoole had equipped the *Shroud* with something called a slave circuit—a remote control device that would bring the ship to them wherever they might be.

After a few days of watching the Dantari to make sure they weren't dangerous, the star travelers had cautiously approached the nearest tribe. Since all the natives had dark hair and wide, flat faces, they were fascinated by Tash's blond braid. Zak's hair was almost as dark as the Dantari's, but his smaller mouth and nose revealed him to be human.

The Dantari saved their greatest fascination for Hoole.

Tash and Zak's uncle was a different species altogether. From a distance, he might pass for human. But his skin was gray and his face and hands were elongated. He was obviously from another planet. He was, in fact, a Shi'ido, a rare species with an even rarer ability: Hoole could change his shape at will.

Instead of being frightened by the newcomers, the Dantari tribe had welcomed them. Zak, Tash, and Hoole had joined in the Dantari's routine as they folded up their tents every morning and continued their endless journey across the plains in search of food. At midday, the tribe stopped to eat and rest, and that was what Tash had been doing when the snail bit her.

"We might as well go back to the camp," Zak suggested. "They'll be moving again soon."

"Where's Uncle Hoole?" Tash asked.

Zak sighed. "Probably taking notes."

Tash nodded. To the Arrandas, their time with the Dantari felt like a vacation. But Hoole had put himself to work. He was an anthropologist—a scientist who studied other cultures—

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and he'd spent every waking moment since they'd arrived on Dantooine studying the tribe. He had already filled an entire datapad with notes about what the Dantari ate, how they raised their children, what kinds of stories they told... his lists seemed endless.

Zak and Tash, meanwhile, had kept themselves busy trying to make friends. There were a few Dantari their age, but they were shy. The adults were a little braver, and Zak and Tash often spoke with them. The Dantari understood a broken version of Basic, the common galactic language. Communication was sometimes hard, but they had been patient with each other, and now Zak and Tash talked with the Dantari often. They had made many friends.

And one enemy.

His name was Maga. Zak and Tash saw him as they walked back to the Dantari camp. He was standing near his tent, talking with a few other Dantari, and he glared at them as they walked past. He was big, even for a Dantari.

Among his people, Maga was called the *garoo*. Hoole had explained to them that a garoo is a cross between a holy man and a magician.

"Makes it sound like he's a Jedi Knight," Zak had noted.

"Does that mean he can use the Force?" Tash had asked.

"I doubt it," Hoole had replied. "I don't believe he has any real abilities. But the other Dantari believe he has magical powers and can command the spirits of the animals, so they give him great respect."

At least, Tash thought, *they used to give him respect, until Uncle Hoole and I showed up*. It wasn't long before a few of the Dantari spotted Hoole shape-shifting and decided that he, too, had magical powers. Later, Tash had also attracted their attention.

Tash smiled, remembering what the Dantari had seen her doing, and tugged at a small pendant around her neck. She'd been using the pendant to practice using the Force. One evening, when she thought she was alone, Tash had made the necklace

move——without touching it. Dantari children, spying on the blond stranger, had been amazed and had run off to tell their parents.

Tash had to admit that she was amazed, too. Still, every time she practiced, she felt the Force grow stronger in her.

Tash fingered the necklace again. The pendant wasn't very valuable——except to her. It was just a thin metal chain with a small red crystal on the end. Ever since their strange adventures began, she'd kept it locked in her cabin for fear of losing it. It had been a gift from her mother, who had kept a matching one. They had both worn their necklaces on the day Zak and Tash had left their home planet, Alderaan, on a field trip. While they were away, Alderaan was destroyed by the Empire. Their mother and father were killed..

Tash frowned. Thinking of her parents stirred up painful memories. She missed them terribly, especially lately. She knew she was starting to grow up. She was thirteen——in a few years she would be an adult, and she knew the Force would grow stronger as she matured. She wished she could talk about things like adulthood and the Force with her mom and dad. She had serious questions to ask. Why did she have the Force and not her friends? Was she meant for something special? Could she possibly be destined to be a Jedi Knight?

Tash had always thought that growing up would mean finding out who you are and what you want out of life. But the older she got, the *less* she knew about herself. She wondered if other kids her age felt the same way.

Of course, most of them had parents to talk to.

Tash looked at the pendant thoughtfully. She'd started wearing it again for two reasons. The first was that it reminded her of her mother and on peaceful Dantooine, she felt safe enough to bring her old memories out of hiding. But the other reason was more practical. The pendant was very small and very light, and Tash found that if she focused on it with the Force, she could make the tiny red pendant move.

John Whitman

She couldn't do much more than that. But it was enough to impress the Dantari.

All except Maga. He couldn't perform tricks like Hoole's and Tash's, and the awe of the other Dantari for the strangers made him angry.

"I think he's still mad at us," Zak whispered to Tash.

"He sure can hold a grudge," Tash replied irritably. "It's not like we did anything to him on purpose."

Maga grunted at them as they passed. His forehead was bumpy and sloped down to his eyebrows, which were bushy and thick. Tash recognized the other Dantari who were with Maga. She didn't know their names, but she knew they were Maga's closest friends, and they didn't like Zak and Tash any more than Maga did.

"Sun falls," Maga growled. "Time to move. You slow us down."

Tash looked up at the sun. "Sun falls" to the Dantari meant exactly what it sounded like: the sun had reached its highest point and was now sinking. It was just past midday.

Maga took an angry step forward. "Offworlders always slow us down." His companions growled in agreement and stepped forward, too.

As the Dantari crowded around her, Tash's heart skipped a beat.

"That is not true," said the cold, hard voice of Uncle Hoole.

Tash suddenly realized her uncle was standing beside her. She didn't know where he had come from. Hoole, like most Shi'ido, had a gift for moving silently and smoothly, and by now she was used to being surprised by him.

The Shi'ido was as tall as Maga, and stared right into his eyes. "My niece and nephew are always ready to move when the tribe moves," he said, "and we always move just as quickly."

Maga blinked. He didn't like Hoole. But he was frightened by Hoole's shape-changing power. He wouldn't dare attack the

Shi'ido. Maga stared back at Hoole for just a moment, then turned away, grunting, "Tribe moves. Do not be slow."

Then he and his followers trudged away.

Tash scowled at Maga's broad back. "That guy really sets my scanners off. Why does he have to treat us so badly? It makes me mad."

"We must be tolerant," Hoole advised. "Remember, we are their guests."

"I don't get why these Dantari are always so concerned about starting on time anyway," Zak observed. "It's not like there's anywhere to go."

Hoole frowned. "It may seem that way to us, Zak, but we are on their world. They have their own customs. They are nomads, and it is their tradition to travel from place to place."

"You'd think they'd get tired once in a while," Zak muttered.

"Remember," Hoole said, "the Dantari do not possess modern technology, and they know little about farming. They must continually travel across the plains in search of food."

Even after nearly a month, Tash and Zak were amazed by how quickly the Dantari broke down their tents, rolled up their animal-skin packs, and started off. In minutes, the small village of tents had vanished completely. The Dantari began marching away from their campsite in a loose, straggly line. With no discussion, the tribe seemed to know where it wanted to go.

Walking in the middle of the crowd, Tash saw the line of low hills ahead grow steadily larger. Because the prairie was so flat, it was hard to judge the distance. Tash thought the hills were very far away, but the tribe reached them long before sunset. The slopes weren't very high, but they were steep.

"How are we going to climb those?" Tash asked.

"Not climb," one of the Dantari said, pointing ahead.

Tash spotted a crack in the steep slope. As they approached, she realized that it was a ravine that led straight through the hills and to the other side.

John Whitman

Without pausing, the tribe of Dantari marched single file into the gap, forming a line to fit into the narrow pathway.

"Uncle Hoole," Tash asked, "how do they know where they're going?"

Hoole shook his head. "I do not have enough information to make a guess," he explained. "However, I believe they are following a traditional path. Their ancestors probably made the same journey, at the same time of year, for thousands of years."

"Boring!" Zak exclaimed.

His voice echoed loudly in the ravine. A moment later, something rumbled in answer.

"What's that?" Tash asked.

"More echoes," Zak replied. "I hope."

But the sound wasn't an echo. It got louder by the second, until it sounded as if the mountain itself was roaring. Tash looked up. For a fraction of a second, she thought she saw a broad-shouldered Dantari standing at the top of the ravine. Then her view was blocked by a boulder that came crashing down the slope. Behind it came another, and another. There were hundreds of rocks bouncing and tumbling down on them.

"Avalanche!"

Chapter Two

The shout of warning was all Tash could manage. She stood rooted to the spot, watching a boulder twice her size bounce down the steep hillside, heading right for her.

She watched it bounce once. Twice. Three times.

There were boulders falling all around Tash. She didn't know if she was paralyzed with fear or was just in shock, but she couldn't move.

Luckily, Hoole could. As soon as the boulders started falling, Hoole's skin rippled across his bones—the weird effect that signaled a shape-change. In the next instant, the Shi'ido had vanished, replaced by a wide-bodied, thick-legged dewback. Tash had seen the creatures once before on a visit to the planet Tatooine. They looked like giant lizards, and they were as strong as a dozen gundarks.

The dewback lunged forward, planting itself between Zak and Tash and the avalanche.

Tash and Zak threw their arms over their heads as the boulder slammed into the dewback's side. The dewback Hoole grunted, but didn't move.

Shocked out of her paralyzed state, Tash felt a flush of anger. She had seen someone on the hill. Someone had started the avalanche on purpose!

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Around them, the Dantari shouted and screamed, searching for cover.

"Over here!" Tash yelled, motioning for the Dantari with her outstretched arms. Her voice was drowned out by the rumbling and scraping of falling rocks, but many of the Dantari saw her movements and dove for the cover of the dewback's broad body.

More boulders slammed into Hoole, but the Shi'ido stubbornly held his ground.

Most of the Dantari had reached safety behind Hoole, but a small Dantari child stumbled and fell to her knees, crying. Her mother turned and started back for her just as another boulder came hurtling into the ravine. It was going to land right on the child.

"Look out!" shouted Zak, but they could see that the little girl couldn't move in time.

Tash was too angry to think. She reached out with the Force, trying to move the flying rock the same way she'd moved the pendant. She *pushed* with her mind. In the split second before the falling stone would hit the girl, Tash felt something give, like a stuck drawer suddenly opening. The rock slammed to the ground, just missing the Dantari girl's head.

"That was close!"

"Yeah," Tash said. She felt exhausted, as though she'd just finished a footrace.

The dewback shivered, and a moment later, Hoole stood in its place. Boulders were piled up all around him. The Shi'ido's stern face wrinkled into a grimace of pain, and he rubbed his left arm.

"Are you all right, Uncle Hoole?" Zak asked.

"I am... bruised," Hoole replied. "Many of those boulders were quite heavy, and traveling quickly. Even in the form of a dewback, I'm afraid I took a beating."

It seemed like a miracle, but no one else was hurt. Many of the Dantari had not yet entered the ravine. And those who had, managed to find safety as the rocks fell.

The travelers hurried the rest of the way through the ravine and came out on the other side of the hills. By now the sun had begun to set. Before them stretched the prairie.

"Oh, that's just prime," Zak groaned. "More grass."

"This looks different, though," Tash said. She squinted and stared at something. On the horizon, she could just make out a few shapes rising out of the grassland. They were too small to be hills and too large to be trees. "There's something out there."

Zak squinted, looking where Tash pointed. "I wonder what it is."

"We'll have to find out tomorrow," Hoole replied. "The Dantari have decided to set up camp for the evening."

This was the most unsettling time of day for Zak and Tash. They were nearly blind in the thickening darkness, while the Dantari seemed to have no problem setting up their animal-skin tents in the dark. Today, however, Zak, Tash, and Hoole quickly set up their tent while the sun was still throwing reddish rays over the prairie. By the time it had set, they were sitting around a small campfire in front of their tent, just one of a dozen campfires lighting the temporary village.

"I'm glad no one was hurt," Tash said, finally catching her breath. "But there's still a problem. Who started the rockslide?"

Hoole raised an eyebrow. "Why do you ask that? I suspect such occurrences are quite common in these hills."

"Maybe," Tash said. "But I think this one was started on purpose." She told them what she'd seen on the hill.

"Are you sure you saw a Dantari?" Hoole asked.

Tash shrugged. "I can't be sure. Everything happened so quickly. But I saw someone... and whoever it was, was as big as a Dantari. As big as a certain Dantari we all know and hate."

Hoole sighed. "You mustn't hate Maga, Tash. Remember, we are intruders in his tribe. And we have taken away some of his authority. But," the Shi'ido added, "if you think that Maga is the being you saw, we must report this to the elders."

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Zak and Tash jumped to their feet and followed Hoole through the collection of tents until they reached a campfire burning at the center of the temporary village.

Unlike some other cultures, the Dantari didn't have one single leader. All important decisions were made by five or six of the oldest and most experienced members of the tribe. These elders generally discussed any problems facing their people and tried to find a solution together. The closest thing the Dantari had to a king or a chief was Maga, the garoo.

There were six elders sitting around the fire, their faces lined with age. Maga sat nearby, scooping out a bowl of porridge from a cauldron that hung over the fire. The elders were already discussing the rockslide, trying to decide if it was still safe to travel the ravine, when Hoole approached them.

"My niece has something to say," Hoole announced.

The elders looked at Tash. She had never really spoken to the elders of the tribe before. She had never thought of them as leaders—just quiet old men and women wearing animal skins. But now, looking at them, she realized that despite their primitive ways, they really were leaders.

Their keen, bright eyes reminded her of a look Princess Leia Organa had once given her, long ago.

"I...", she began, then stopped. She glanced at Maga.

"Perhaps this should be said in private," Hoole suggested.

One of the elders, who had a gap between his front teeth, shook his head. "Not Dantari way. No secrets from people."

Tash nodded. It was probably a good way to run the tribe. Or the galaxy. Secrets and hidden schemes were methods the Empire used. Still, she felt uncomfortable accusing Maga to his face.

"I saw...", she started again. "That is, I *think* I saw Maga standing at the top of the hill just before the avalanche started."

"Maga push rocks?" another elder asked.

Tash nodded.

All six elders turned toward their garoo, who was glaring at Tash. But instead of becoming angry, Maga shrugged and said through a mouthful of porridge, "Girl is wrong."

The gap-toothed elder turned back to Tash. "You saw his face? You know?"

Tash frowned. She hadn't seen a face. Finally, she admitted, "Everything happened too fast. I saw something up there. Then the rocks came down. I thought it was Maga... but no, I didn't see his face."

Maga snorted. "Not see my face because Maga was not there. Ask Bann. Ask Durba."

Tash scowled. Bann and Durba were two of Maga's friends. They'd say anything to protect him.

One of the elders shrugged. "Maga is garoo. Garoo does not lie."

But the gap-toothed elder shook his head. "Girl has power. Girl is like garoo."

"Only Maga is garoo!" Maga growled, leaping to his feet.

The elders stirred briefly, unsettled by his outburst. They murmured to each other in low voices for a moment, then nodded. Finally, the gap-toothed elder spoke. "Girl says she saw, but is not sure. Maga says he was not there, and was seen by eyes of others. We will do nothing. Water mixes with water."

Tash sighed. "Water mixes with water" was a popular Dantari saying. The Dantari believed that some problems could not be solved. It was like one cup of water poured into another cup of water. Which water was which, and did it even matter?

"But I saw someone!" Tash insisted.

"Who?" the elder asked.

Tash didn't answer.

Maga grinned. His teeth were crooked and yellow. "Yes, offworlder," he said. "Who?"

Again, Tash didn't answer. Maga snorted. "Girl is crazy. Whole family is crazy. Parents probably crazy, too."

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Tash bristled at the mention of her parents. Anger boiled up inside her, hotter than a nova. Gathering her strength, she glared at Maga and lashed out with the Force.

Chapter Three

Tash was surprised at how easily the Force bent to her will this time. The cauldron near Maga suddenly tilted. A blob of hot porridge sloshed out of the pot, spilling right into his lap. The big Dantari leaped to his feet, howling as he tried to wipe the hot, sticky substance away.

The elders and Zak laughed. To them, it looked as if Maga had stumbled against the pot and spilled the porridge all over himself.

Tash turned away to hide the smug expression on her face. Without saying a word to Zak or Uncle Hoole, she went back to their tent, crawled onto a soft fur blanket that served as her bed, and fell asleep.

That night, Tash dreamed.

She was standing on the bridge of a starship. Through the viewport, she could see her home planet, Alderaan, floating in space like a blue-green gem on a necklace of stars. She felt happy. She was going home to see her parents. Everything was all right.

Suddenly, a shadow fell across the planet as a large dark object passed between Alderaan and the sun.

It was the Death Star. Tash watched the Imperial battle station slowly rotate until its enormous superlaser pointed directly at her homeworld.

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"No!" Tash screamed, but her voice made no sound. The Death Star was preparing to fire.

Tash remembered the Force. She had moved the tiny pendant. She had moved the large boulder. Maybe she could even move the Death Star. She tried to calm herself to find the peaceful place within her where the Force seemed to be. Then she reached out and willed the Death Star to move.

It didn't.

She tried again, pushing harder, but still the battle station crept forward, preparing to destroy her home planet, her parents, and everything she loved.

Tash's stomach twisted into an angry knot. She couldn't let her parents die! She wouldn't!

The minute she grew angry, Tash felt the Force take on a new shape inside her. It wasn't calm or peaceful——now it rolled and wriggled inside her as if she'd swallowed a snake. But it was powerful. Very powerful. With it, she knew she could do anything. She could destroy the Death Star with a thought. She would be more powerful than Darth Vader. More powerful than the Emperor himself! All she had to do was use her anger...

Tash awoke, sitting up with a start. Her heart was racing and her hair was matted with sweat. She held up her hand——it was trembling. She realized she felt angry. What had she been dreaming? Something about using the Force to destroy the Death Star...

She put her hands on her stomach, remembering the sick feeling of snakes wriggling around inside her. That wasn't the Force. At least, it wasn't the way she wanted the Force to feel.

The first time Tash had used the Force was when she'd met the ghost of a Jedi named Aidan. She'd felt calm and at peace. Using the Force had taken no effort at all.

Tash slipped her pendant from around her neck and put it on the ground. She took a deep breath, letting all her muscles relax as she focused on the little necklace. She reached out through the Force and willed the pendant to rise.

The tiny red crystal trembled, then slowly lifted into the air. It hovered there for a moment or two, then dropped back down to the ground.

Tash looked around for something larger to move. On the ground near the entrance to their tent sat a serving bowl. It wasn't as large as the cauldron she'd dumped on Maga, but it was larger than anything Tash had tried to move during practice. She focused on the bowl, imagining that it would rise.

It didn't move.

Tash frowned. She'd moved bigger objects twice now——first the boulder, then the pot full of porridge. What was the problem?

Suddenly it struck her. Both of those times she had been angry. Was that the key? Was she supposed to use her anger to strengthen the Force?

That didn't sound right to Tash. She had read everything she could find about the Jedi, and although the Empire had banned all information about them years ago, she still managed to learn a lot. Everything she had read told her that the Jedi did not use anger or aggressive emotions. They fought for peace.

But her power was stronger when she used her anger. How could that be?

Tash wondered about her dream for the rest of that night, and it filled her thoughts all the next morning. As the Dantari broke camp and started their hike, she kept to herself, walking silently along with the other Dantari while Zak zipped in and out of the migrating crowd, running races with some of the Dantari children. At first Tash didn't think he had noticed her change in mood, but when they stopped to rest at noon, he came up to her.

"So what's got your comlink so silent?" he asked. "Why so gloomy?"

Tash frowned. "It would take a while to explain." Zak replied, "Okay, you can tell me on the way."

"On the way where?"

Zak started to walk. "Come on. I want to show you something."

Before Tash could ask another question, Zak was running across the prairie. She had to sprint to catch up with him. She

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reached his side just as they came to the top of a very low hill. It was more like a mound of grass, really, but it was high enough to block the view of the horizon. At the top of the mound was a tall bilba tree, its branches covered with sharp thorns. Zak pulled her down so that they were crouched low in the grass.

"Look," he said, pointing ahead.

But Tash had already seen it. Ahead of them lay the glittering silver line of a river. On the far side of the river, Tash could see two separate sets of buildings. The closer one looked ancient and ruined, but it was still too far away to be seen in detail. The buildings farther away had a familiar shape, as if they were new.

"I could see those places when we came through the ravine," she said. "I thought they were hills or something."

"Nope," Zak said. "I heard some of the Dantari talk about them. They're buildings. Here, on a planet that isn't supposed to have any sort of civilization at all."

"It is strange," she agreed.

"You want to go investigate?" Zak asked.

Tash was tempted. "How far away are they?"

Zak shrugged. "It's hard to tell, especially since I don't know how big the buildings are. But I'd guess not more than a couple of kilometers. If we hurried we could be there in no time."

But Tash had already made up her mind. "No," she decided. "Not right now. Besides, I'm not sure how safe I feel wandering around alone after what happened at the ravine. Maga is awfully angry at me."

"Maga," Zak chuckled. "You handled him pretty well last night."

Tash turned to her brother. "You knew that was me? With the porridge?"

"Let's just say I figured you were trying to *Force* the issue."

Tash sat down in the grass, shaking her head. "It's not funny, Zak. I think I did something wrong."

"It was just a practical joke, Tash."

"But I used the Force," she explained. "And I was mad."

"So?" Zak replied.

Tash wanted to tell him about waking up angry the night before, but she couldn't. Finally, she said, "I don't know... it's not just the kind of thing I normally do."

"No kidding," Zak chuckled. "It's about time you started to loosen up a little."

Tash shook her head. "I'm just not sure that's the kind of person I'm supposed to be."

Zak shrugged his shoulders. "You're supposed to be who you are. That's all."

"Yeah, but who is that?" Tash asked, staring out at the prairie. "I mean, I can use the Force a little, right? So am I supposed to be some wise Jedi Master now, or a thirteen-year-old? I don't think I can be both."

"You think too much," Zak replied.

Tash was about to reply when she felt a hand clamp down on her neck like a vise. A powerful hand spun her around, and she found herself staring into Maga's ugly face.

"So," the Dantari growled, "now it is Maga's turn to play tricks."

Chapter Four

Tash didn't know how the huge Dantari had sneaked up on them so quietly. All she knew was that his enormous hand was poised to snap her neck like a twig. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Zak caught in a similar hold. Then her vision started to go black around the edges.

Maga spun her around and she found herself staring into his wide, flat face. He was so close that his stinking breath hung around her nose like a thick cloud. She started to swoon.

Just when she thought the Dantari would break her neck, his grip suddenly loosened. Tash dropped to the ground. The ground seemed to spin as she felt blood rush to her head. Fighting to keep her knees from trembling, Tash climbed to her feet and looked around to see who had stopped Maga from killing them.

But there was no one there.

Maga stood before them, almost twice as tall as Tash. Stringy black hair hung over his forehead and into his eyes. His face was set in an angry frown.

"Wh-Why?" she gasped.

Maga grunted. "Why do I not kill you?" His dark eyes gleamed. "I could. No one sees. I could break you!" He made a motion as though snapping a tree branch, and Tash shuddered.

But the Dantari's frown suddenly disappeared. "I do it to show you. To prove to you I do not try to kill you."

Tash didn't know whether to be happy or shocked or both. She looked around again. The Dantari camp was far away, and although they were standing atop the small hill, it would have been a simple thing for Maga to carry them down the other side of the hill, away from camp, and dispose of them both. Uncle Hoole was not around to protect them. There were no witnesses.

"I-I'm sorry, Maga," she said at last. "I guess I misjudged you."

"Right," Zak added, although he didn't sound quite as certain.

Maga grunted softly, which must have been his way of accepting the apology, because his shoulders relaxed. He looked past them at the ruins in the distance. "You look at the place of fallen rocks?"

"The ruins?" Tash asked. "Yes, we were interested. We didn't think the Dantari built anything."

Maga shook his head. "Those are not Dantari. Offworlders built those. The far one built fifteen seasons ago, before Maga became garoo. The near one is older. Much older." His dark eyes studied Tash. "Thousands of seasons ago. Built by Jedi."

Tash's eyes widened. "Y-You know about the Jedi?"

Maga laughed at her. "Maga is garoo. Wise man of my people. My teacher pass down wisdom to me. His teacher pass to him." He puffed up his chest proudly. "What Dantari for ten thousand seasons have seen, and heard, is here. " He tapped his head.

Tash felt a heavy weight fall around her heart. She really had misjudged Maga. Uncle Hoole had warned her not to be so harsh. After all, they were the strangers in this beautiful but empty land. Tash had made the mistake of assuming the Dantari were as empty as their planet. She had thought the garoo was a fake, a phony magician. But it amazed her to think of all the things he must know.

"Is there anything left in the Jedi ruins?" Tash asked. "Anything worth seeing?"

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Maga shrugged. "No one knows. Dantari do not go there. When offworlders built their hills of stone, they did go to ruins. But they left."

"We've got to go!" Tash said. "Maga, please take us." Zak looked from Tash to Maga and back to Tash. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Tash hardly heard him. "Zak, don't you see? This is my chance to learn more about the Jedi. There could be old tools, or datadisks, maybe even a whole library that can teach me about the Jedi. Come on!"

And she was off and running before Zak could protest.

Distance was always hard to judge on Dantooine. Hills that seemed far away were actually less than a day's walk. Ruins that looked close enough to reach in a short sprint turned out to be a long-distance jog. By the time Tash got close enough to the ruins to see them clearly, she was out of breath and hot from running. She had stripped off her long-sleeved overshirt and tied it around her waist. Even in short sleeves, she felt the sun beating down on her.

She had planned to enter the ruins whether or not Zak and Maga caught up to her. But as she reached the first few scattered building stones on the outskirts of the ancient Jedi site, she decided she couldn't go on, and sat down to rest.

The ruins looked old, as old as anything Tash had seen. She had been to the planet Gobindi once, a jungle world where the ancient inhabitants had built huge stone temples as high as mountains. She had also visited the abandoned space station Nespis 8. These ruins looked older than either of those places.

Once, several dozen buildings must have stood here, protected by a ring of stones that encircled them all. But over thousands of years, the buildings had collapsed under the wind and rain of Dantooine's weather. Stones had fallen, ceilings had given way, walls had tumbled. Still, through the maze of stone blocks that were taller than she was, Tash could make out at least one building still standing somewhere amid the rubble.

By the time she had her breath back, her brother and Maga had caught up.

"Tash," Zak said between huge gulps of air. "I think we should go back. The Dantari will want to break camp soon."

"Dantari will not move," Maga stated. "We camp at river for many days. Dantari will not move."

"Good," Tash said, pushing herself to her feet. "I want to see what's in there."

"Tash," Zak said, grabbing at the shirt around her waist to hold her back. "I don't think this is a good idea. Uncle Hoole—"

"He'll understand," she said. "Zak, this is a Jedi place. Don't you know what that means to me?"

Zak shook his head; "Yeah, but it's not like these ruins are going anywhere. They've been here a thousand years. They can wait until tomorrow."

"Maybe, but I can't!" she said, and jumped ahead. She reached the outer ring of stones that had once been a protective wall. Passing inside, she soon vanished behind a stone the size of a small starship.

Zak sighed. He knew he should run after her, but he had sprinted to catch up, and his legs felt as if they'd fallen into a black hole.

Beside him, Maga chuckled.

Zak suddenly thought of something. "Hey, Maga, I thought you said the Dantari would camp close to the river."

"We do."

Zak pointed to the river, which was less than a kilometer away. "But this was the closest way to the river. Why didn't the tribe just come this way?"

Maga shrugged. "Dantari do not camp here. It is too close to the fallen stones."

"So?" Zak asked.

Maga pointed at the ruined Jedi fortress. "Dantari fear the place of fallen stones."

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"Why?"

Maga grinned. "Because of the legends."

Zak didn't like the way Maga was dragging this out. "What legends?"

"The ancient garoos say," Maga chuckled, "those who enter the place of fallen stones do not come out again."

Chapter Five

Tash was much too far away to hear Maga's triumphant laughter. And she *might* have heard Zak shouting faintly after her, but if she did, she thought it was the wind that moaned among the rocks.

She entered the ruins of the Jedi fortress.

Even after thousands of years of decay, the ruins were impressive. Most modern buildings were made of steelcrete. Even the ancient stone temples she'd seen on the planet Gobindi looked as if they'd been put together by machines. But these——these looked like ruined works of art. Tash walked up to the remains of a stone wall. Only three or four blocks were still standing, but each block was twice her height and several meters thick. They must have weighed many tons apiece.

Tash looked more closely and noticed that there were no marks on the stone itself. The stone was rough. It hadn't been smoothed by a construction droid, or even carried by one. If it had, there would have been scrape marks on the surface.

A small clump of grass grew at the base of the wall. Tash plucked a blade and tried to slip it between two of the stones. It wouldn't fit. Tash realized that only one thing could put stones together with such precision.

The Force.

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She felt the Force moving all around her. It was like the wind, but not exactly. She could feel a breeze on her skin, but the Force...she felt that *inside* her skin. It was like——

Chink, chink! Tash heard something scramble over the rocks to her left. When she looked, there was nothing there.

Chink, chink! Something scuttled between two fallen stones in front of her, but disappeared before she could see what it was.

"I'm not alone here," she whispered.

She wondered whether to go forward or back, but when she turned around, she wasn't sure which way was back.

"These ruins aren't *that* big," she said.

She turned in the direction she thought she had come from and trotted along the half-ruined wall. She turned left, and found herself looking down a narrow alley between two ruined buildings. That was the way she had come... wasn't it?

Chink, chink! Again she turned to look, and again saw nothing. Tash thought about running away, but she didn't know where to run. So instead she bolted after whatever had vanished.

By the time she reached the corner, whatever it was, was gone.

However, she knew she had reached the center of the ruins.

Before her stood the building she had seen from outside, the only intact structure still standing in the ruins. It wasn't very tall, and it wasn't very wide. It was built in the shape of a short round tower.

And the Force was strong inside it. She could feel it from the outside.

Cautiously, Tash crept forward. She felt as if she were being watched.

She reached the entrance. There must have been a door here once, but it had been blasted away, leaving a hole framed by jagged edges. Carefully, Tash put her hand on the rough edge of the broken entryway and peered inside. The room was empty. But that didn't stop a chill from running down her spine like ice water. She felt something here.

The dark side of the Force.

The sensation that someone, or something, was watching her grew stronger. Her skin tingled, and the tiny hairs on her arms and the back of her neck stood on end.

The dark feeling frightened her. But at the same time, she felt something inside her reach out for it. She didn't want it to happen, but she couldn't stop it.

Distracted by the cold feeling of the dark side, Tash never heard the footsteps that closed in behind her. She didn't hear anything until a hand wrapped itself around her neck.

Tash felt herself jerked backward until she lost her footing. An arm encircled her throat, cutting off her air. Whoever it was, they were strong.

Maga! she thought. *He's trying to kill me!*

But then she heard a male voice speaking without the harsh Dantari accent. "Don't struggle, I——"

She didn't know who her attacker was, but she didn't plan to wait to find out. Briefly, Tash considered trying to use the Force to lift up a nearby rock and hurl it at his head. But she couldn't concentrate, so she settled for something simpler.

She bit him.

Her teeth sank into his arm and the man howled in pain. He loosened his grip and she broke free, turning to face her attacker. He was human, with a round freckled face and reddish hair. He had backed away, preparing himself for more trouble as he clutched at the bite wound on his arm.

When she saw that the man had given up the fight, Tash eased up a little. "Who are you? Why are you here? Why did you grab me?"

"I think I should be the one to ask the questions," the man said.

But he didn't get a chance to ask any. Something large and dark and furry vaulted over Tash's shoulder and slammed into the stranger, driving him into the ground.

Chapter Six

Tash couldn't tell what species the creature was. All she could tell was that long, curved fangs stabbed out from its upper jaw. Then, an instant later, the creature shivered as if very cold, and transformed into a tall, gray-skinned Shi'ido.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash shouted.

"Tash, are you injured?" Hoole said, never taking his dark eyes off the stranger. He loomed over the man, who lay flat on his back, stunned.

"No," she said. "It's all right, you can——"

"Tash!" her brother yelled. He came running up from behind. "Sorry it took me so long to get here. I thought I'd better go back and get Uncle Hoole. And then we heard the screams."

Hoole still hadn't taken his eyes off the red-haired man. "We would have reached you sooner, but the design of these ruins is most intriguing. And confusing."

"Yeah," Zak agreed. "And I think Maga knew about it. He wanted you to wander in here and get lost, rash."

Tash had nearly forgotten about Maga and didn't care about him at the moment. She pointed to the man. "I think it's all right, Uncle Hoole. You can let him up."

Hoole stepped back, his face still dark with anger. "Why did you attack my niece?"

The man stood up and dusted himself off. He was wearing an old flight suit. His red hair was a tangled mess and dust now covered his face. His eyes were bright but, Tash thought, kind of empty.

The glowpanels are lit, she thought, *but nobody's home*. "I didn't attack her," the man answered. Words tumbled out of his mouth. "I was so surprised to see anyone here... we never get visitors... I just didn't know if she was real."

"Where did you come from?" Hoole demanded. "Over there," the man said, waving his hand toward the river.

"How did you get here?" Hoole demanded.

"I walked," the man replied.

Hoole's frown deepened. He tried an even simpler question. "What is your name?"

"My name is Eyal, and as I said, I should be the one asking questions." Eyal's eyes brightened, as though he'd just gotten a brilliant idea. "But why don't we go back to our base? We can talk there."

Hoole raised an eyebrow. "Your base?"

"Sure," Eyal said warmly.

He pointed in the direction of the group of newer buildings.

Hoole and the two Arrandas exchanged glances, and Tash could tell her brother and uncle had the same questions she had: *Was this the old Rebel base? Wasn't it supposed to be abandoned?*

"Excuse us," Hoole said, pulling Zak and Tash to one side. Eyal simply nodded and smiled.

"I don't like this," Zak said. "He attacked Tash!"

"Yes," Hoole agreed in a low voice. "But his presence also raises some intriguing questions. I am curious to know who is on this planet. If there are Rebels here, they could help us in our efforts to evade the Empire."

Zak was still suspicious. "Uncle Hoole, you're usually the one who warns us to keep out of trouble. Don't you think we should avoid this guy like a black hole?"

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Hoole considered. "You have a point, Zak, but if we keep our eyes open we should be fine."

Before they left the Jedi ruins, Tash asked Hoole and Zak to examine the round room, wondering if they would feel the same thing she had. They did. Zak said it felt like the electric tingle of a scanner. Hoole merely shrugged.

Eyal led them out of the ruins. Although the layout of the place still confused Tash, Eyal seemed to have an excellent sense of direction.

"How do you know where you're going?" Tash asked him. Try as she might, she couldn't tell exactly where they were. If she hadn't known better, she would have thought the ruins were shifting around, making new paths and blocking old ones. But of course that was impossible.

"It just takes some getting used to," Eyal explained.

Instead of taking them back toward the prairie, from where they'd come, he led them in the opposite direction. As they exited the ruins, they found themselves near the river. To Tash's surprise, she saw that a bridge had been built across the river. It was simple, made of bilba tree wood, but it was a good, solid construction.

"I didn't think the Dantari built anything," she said.

"Oh, the Dantari didn't build this," Eyal said. "They never come here. I don't think they like the ruins, or the base."

The abandoned Rebel base rose up out of the grassland as if it had been put there by mistake. Located a short distance from the river, it had only five buildings—round, modern, brown domes that rose several stories high.

As they drew near, Tash and Zak heard sounds of activity. Voices were carried to them on the wind, as well as the sounds of hammering and drilling.

"I thought the Rebel base was abandoned long ago, before the Death Star even," Zak said as they crossed the bridge.

Eyal blinked. "What is the Death Star?"

"Are you kidding?" Zak answered. "I thought everyone had heard about the Battle of Yavin, and the Death Star. The Rebels destroyed it!"

Eyal shrugged. "We have been cut off from the rest of the galaxy for some time. In fact, that's why I'm bringing you to the base. I'm hoping you can help us get off this planet."

Hoole and the Arrandas quickly saw what Eyal meant by *us*. Not only was the Rebel base not abandoned, it was filled with people. All of them were dressed in jumpsuits that looked as if they'd come out of the same box. There were humans, and short, gill-faced Sullustans, and Bothans, and several other species Tash didn't recognize. They all seemed to be working hard, carrying bundles this way and that.

Tash noticed that all the activity revolved around one building in the center. As they approached, the Rebels all stopped and stared—except for one Sullustan, who trotted toward them. He was shorter than Tash and had large dark eyes and even larger ears.

"Eyal," he said in a thick accent. "Who are the strangers?"

"Hello, Dr'uun," Eyal replied. "I found them wandering in the old ruins. I thought our leader should meet them right away."

"You're right," Dr'uun said. "But he's away at the moment."

Eyal considered. "Should we wait?"

The Sullustan shook his head. "The leader wouldn't want any delays. If these people can help us, we should get started immediately."

Tash had no idea what they were talking about, and she could see that Zak was just as confused. She wanted to ask questions, but Hoole spoke first. "We would be happy to help in any way possible. But I do not know what we can do for you."

"Come with us."

Eyal and Dr'uun led them toward the central building. There were more stares, and a small crowd began to follow them until Eyal called out, "I know you're excited, but you all have duties to

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perform. Get back to work until our leader returns. He'll tell you everything you need to know about the new arrivals."

At the mention of their leader, the crowd of Rebels nodded, muttered, and returned to their duties, which seemed to involve scurrying around the base for no obvious reason.

Whatever it had been before, the central building had been turned into a giant aircraft hangar. The roof was high and the inside of the building totally hollowed out, making one enormous space. It wasn't empty, though.

Squatting in the middle was a spaceship. Or at least, what might have been a spaceship, if spaceships were made out of old scrap metal, bilba tree wood, and patches of woven grass. It was like a giant model of a star freighter, several times larger than their own ship, the *Shroud*. It was the kind of thing children might build in their backyard, only on a much bigger scale. It obviously wasn't real. So what Eyal said next caught the three newcomers by surprise.

"You can help us with this," Eyal said. "Can you get our spaceship to fly?"

Chapter Seven

Tash waited for Eyal to laugh—he had to be joking. But the Rebel continued to look at them seriously. Hoole raised an eyebrow—it was as close as her stone-faced uncle would ever get to looking surprised.

"That will not fly," Hoole told Eyal.

"That's true," Dr'uun said. "Especially if I don't get back to work. Eyal, make our visitors welcome, and come see me after you've talked." The Sullustan hurried toward the ridiculous starship and disappeared inside.

Eyal sighed. "I'm afraid you're right. We had several dismantled ships, and we put all the parts together. But we don't have a working repulsor unit to get the ship off the ground. And we couldn't get very far in deep space anyway, because we don't have a hyperdrive motivator."

Zak couldn't contain himself any longer. "Yeah, not to mention that your ship is made of wood and grass!" Eyal blinked.

He didn't seem to understand Zak's point.

A hint of suspicion entered Hoole's eye. "You are trying to leave the planet?"

"Of course," Eyal said. "We've been stranded here for a long time. Our leader says we need to get off Dantooine right away."

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"Can't others in the Rebellion pick you up?" Tash asked. "Don't they know you're here?"

"Apparently not," Eyal admitted. "We have no communications equipment, and no one has arrived on Dantooine except you."

"How did you get here?" Tash asked.

Eyal blinked. He looked, Tash realized, as if he'd never considered the question before. "We were... we were left here."

"You mean when the rest of the Rebels abandoned the base?" Zak asked.

Again Eyal paused. "Yes."

Hoole considered. Tash could sense that he was bothered by the strange behavior of these Rebels. But he didn't seem to think they were a threat. Finally, Hoole said, "If you need to get off the planet, we can help. We have a ship. It's far too small to accommodate everyone. But we could take a few of you, and—"

"You have a ship!" Eyal shouted. "That's perfect! Where is it?"

"In hiding," Hoole explained. "We didn't want to frighten the Dantari."

"Could we reach it quickly?" Eyal asked.

"There is no need to go to it," Hoole said. He pulled a small device from the folds of his robe. It was a flat, black rectangle with several buttons. "I can summon the ship with this remote. The autopilot is programmed to fly slowly and safely, but the ship could reach us in—" he paused to check the readout on the small remote's computer screen—"in a little over a standard hour."

A Sullustan trotted past them. "Hello, Eyal!" the Sullustan called out.

"Hello, Dr'aan!" Eyal called back as the Sullustan passed by.

Tash did a double take as the small Sullustan hurried away. "Did you see that?" she asked.

"What?" Zak asked.

"That Sullustan," she sputtered. "He-He looked just like Dr'uun."

Zak turned, but by that time the second Sullustan was out of sight. He shrugged. "Maybe all Sullustans look alike," he said wryly. "Maybe all humans look alike to them."

Tash ignored the joke. "Maybe it was the jumpsuit," she muttered. "They're all wearing the same uniform."

She looked at Eyal as if to ask a question, but their guide was too absorbed by Hoole and his small remote.

Hoole entered a code into the remote, and watched as the screen showed him a series of signals. "The remote shows that all systems are functioning. The *Shroud* should be here in approximately two hours and forty minutes."

Eyal looked extremely relieved. "This is the best news we've had. Will you excuse me? I need to tell some of the others."

"Of course," Hoole replied. "What should we do in the meantime?"

"Feel free to look around," Eyal said. "Or you can walk back down to the river. It is pleasant there. I'll be back shortly." He hurried out of the building.

Hoole, Zak, and Tash exchanged glances. Hoole nodded for them to follow him, and they left the hangar. Hoole led them back toward the river, where they sat in the grass near the wooden bridge. Beside them, the wide river flowed quietly and peacefully. They were well out of earshot of the Rebels.

"Do you get the feeling these people are a few starships short of a fleet?" Zak said.

"At least *one* starship short," Tash laughed, thinking of their ridiculous ship.

"I agree there is much to question," Hoole said. "Starting with the fact that anyone is here at all. When I first heard mention of Dantooine and considered it as a place for us to hide, I learned that there was an abandoned Rebel base. However, the Rebels left because the Empire had discovered them. It is highly unlikely that they would use the base again once it had been exposed."

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"Although," Tash replied, "it's not such a bad idea. Why would the Empire come back to a place that was already abandoned? Maybe it was a good place for the Rebels after all."

"But *these* Rebels?" Zak said skeptically. "Think about the Rebels we've met. Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, Wedge Antilles. They're all as keen as laser beams. *These* people"——he gestured toward the Rebel base——"are, well, a little slow."

"And would their fellow Rebels really have left them here?" Tash wondered.

Hoole shook his head. "I find it difficult to believe that they are part of the Rebel Alliance. *They*, however, seem to believe it, and we have no cause to argue with them."

"So what do we do?" Zak asked.

"They have an earnest desire to leave the planet, and they are harmless enough," the Shi'ido replied. "I see no reason to refuse them assistance." Hoole looked at his niece. "Unless you have feelings that tell you otherwise, Tash?"

Tash tried to gather her thoughts. What was she feeling? "I don't think so," she said at last. "I mean, I do feel something, but I'm sure it has nothing to do with these people. When Eyal talks, I believe him. I don't get any feelings in the Force, as I do when people are lying and planning to hurt us." She paused. "But when I was in the ruins, I felt something from the dark side, something I've only felt before around Darth Vader."

They had met Vader once. Tash and Zak had been his prisoners for a short time. Neither of them liked to think about it.

"I'd say that falls into the category of not good," Zak said.

"Do you have any idea why you got that feeling?" Hoole asked.

Tash shook her head. She couldn't bring herself to tell them the other part——that she had found herself reaching out to the dark side. All she said was, "I was trying to figure that out when Eyal grabbed me."

"Speaking of getting grabbed," Zak said, "I want to make sure no one gets grabbed by Maga. Uncle Hoole, Maga lured Tash into the ruins, hoping she'd get lost. You should have heard him laugh!"

Hoole's eyes darkened. "Yes, I'm afraid I was too forgiving of Maga. He poses an obvious danger. However, if we are to help these beings, we will not be staying on Dantooine much longer anyway."

Tash and Zak had mixed reactions to the news. Dantooine had been a refreshing break from their recent troubles, and neither one of them felt in any hurry to leave. Still, it obviously wasn't safe to remain near Maga any longer.

"We still have some time before the ship arrives," Hoole said. "I believe I would like to take Eyal up on his offer and look around. Shall we go back into the base?"

"Prime," Zak said, jumping to his feet. "As long as you're sure they're not going to pull blasters on us, I want to find out just how crazy they are. Let's move."

"Actually, I'd rather not," Tash replied. "You go ahead."

Hoole paused. "It would be wiser to stay together." Tash knew that if she tried to sort out her thoughts in the company of her uncle or her brother, she'd end up talking to them. And she wasn't ready for that yet. "I have some things to think about."

Hoole seemed to read her mind. "I would prefer that you not return to the Jedi ruins just yet."

"I promise," she said.

"In that case," Hoole considered, "very well. The Dantari do not seem to come near the ruins, so you are safe from Maga. But please do not wander off."

Tash promised again, and waved as Zak and Hoole departed.

Once she was alone, she let out a deep sigh. She realized that she'd been on edge since the moment she'd entered the Jedi ruins.

No, she thought, I've been anxious since before that. She'd been edgy since she'd used the Force in anger against Maga. Tash tried

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to remember her nightmare, but all she recalled was the cold, dreadful feeling of the dark side.

The moment Tash thought of the dark side of the Force, it seemed to reach out and surround her. Tash shivered as though a chill wind had washed over her. The sun lost some of its shine. The blue sky turned a bit darker. A gray mist settled around the edges of her vision. She stared ahead at the bridge, but it seemed clouded by fog. She blinked, but her vision would not clear.

I need to concentrate on something, she thought. *I should practice with the Force.*

Tash pulled the crystal pendant from inside her shirt. Despite the fog, the ruby-red gem flashed in the sunlight. Tash tried to focus on the pendant, imagining the Force connecting her to the tiny crystal.

Relax, she told herself. *The Force will work when you're peaceful.*

But Tash couldn't relax. The crystal pendant made her think of her mother, and this time, instead of the warm memories of the moment her mother had given her the pendant, all she could think of was her mother's death. Her mother was gone forever, wiped out, along with an entire planet, by the Empire.

An angry frown crossed Tash's face.

She *hated* the Empire.

Shaking the thought from her head, Tash held the pendant in the palm of her hand and refocused. She tried to remain calm, but all she could think about was how sad she was... and how terrible the Empire was... and how angry she was at all Imperials... and how she wished she could use the Force to destroy the Emperor forever.

The pendant leaped from her hand and flew through the air.

Tash watched in disbelief as the pendant fell into the grass. She had never been able to move anything—large or small—that far before.

Instinctively, she knew why.

It was the dark side. She had let herself get angry, even hateful, while thinking of the Empire. It had given her a strength she'd never had before.

The dark side.

Tash felt it call to her again. It was tugging at her. She felt it pull her toward the ruins... toward the room at the center of the Jedi fortress. Something was there. Waiting for her.

Tash tried to ignore the silent call by putting her mind on her pendant. She got down on her hands and knees in the grass to look for it.

Nearby, she heard footsteps on the bridge. She looked up. It was Eyal. He was passing her, walking across the bridge toward the ruins.

"Hi. Lost something?" Eyal asked.

"Yes, but I'll find it, thanks," she replied.

He nodded and walked on toward the base.

Tash stuck her nose back into the grass, searching for the pendant. It had to be here somewhere...

Tash heard footsteps on the bridge. She looked up.

It was Eyal. He was crossing the bridge, heading toward the ruins.

Again.

Chapter Eight

While Tash was sitting on the riverbank, Hoole and Zak went back to the Rebel base. As before, they received quite a few stares but were otherwise ignored.

"They sure seem busy," Zak said as several Rebel personnel hurried past. "I wonder what they're doing."

"Perhaps word of our ship has spread," Hoole suggested, "and they are preparing for departure. I wonder if there is some sort of computer record stored here that we could look at."

"If there is, it would be in that building," Zak said, turning toward the closest of the five domes.

"How are you so certain?" the Shi'ido asked.

Zak pointed to a small shed beside the dome. Tubes ran from the shed into the dome wall. Both the shed and the tubes looked as if they hadn't been cleaned or repaired in years. "That's a climate control unit. Or at least what's left of one. Since computers need cool air, the Rebels probably pump air from there into the computer room."

Hoole nodded. "I forget how much you know about technology. Come."

They strolled over to the building. There was a doorway but no door, and they walked inside. No one seemed to mind. In fact, this particular building was almost empty. Unlike in the

hangar, there were several floors above them, and many rooms on each floor: Fortunately, they did not have to search every room. The same tubes Zak had seen running into the building ran along the ceiling. Zak and Hoole simply followed the tubes down a dusty hallway and into a large room at the back.

The room was almost completely empty. They could see scuff marks on the floor indicating where computers had once stood, but most of them had been removed. Only a few remained, and these were heavily coated with dust and seemed to be inactive.

Hoole frowned. "It would appear this computer room is no longer in use."

Zak looked at one computer's control panel. "Maybe. But this was used recently. At least, it wasn't years ago." He pointed to several buttons that had been wiped free of dust. And the screen itself had been sloppily cleared, as though someone had wiped their hand across it.

Zak found the activation switch and flipped it on. The computer lights slowly faded up, and they heard a weak hum. "The battery power is fading," Zak said.

"Show me what you can access," Hoole requested.

Zak's fingers flew over the keyboard. "There's not much here. I guess if the Rebels abandoned this place, they erased all of the vital information. All that's left are a few personnel records. Names and profiles of some of the staff and work assignments. Boring stuff."

"Call up Eyal's name," Hoole said.

Zak did as he was asked. The computer seemed to work through the request slowly. Finally, a few lines of text appeared on the screen. As they read over the screen, Zak's jaw dropped and Hoole raised an eyebrow.

NAME: Eyal Shah

BIRTH PLANET: Corellia

AGE: 27

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All the information on the screen matched what Eyal had told Tash.

But the being in the picture was totally different.

"Maybe it's an error," Zak said, looking at the picture of a total stranger. "This computer's old. The files could be corrupted."

"Perhaps," Hoole agreed. "There should be an original datadisk for each person, shouldn't there?"

"Yeah, a backup in case the computers fail." There was a cabinet below the computer terminal. Zak opened it and found a tray labeled PERSONNEL DATA DISKS. But it was empty. "So much for that." A hint of nervousness crept into his voice. "Uncle Hoole, what do you think is going on here?"

"Nothing to be concerned about. At least not yet," the Shi'ido replied. "Aside from the strange behavior regarding the starship, there is nothing here but a personnel record with the wrong picture attached. This is all explainable. But I think it is best to keep our eyes open."

Zak had stopped listening. He had turned to look at his uncle as Hoole spoke, but a moment later his eyes went wide. "Hey!" he yelled, and pointed over Hoole's shoulder. Hoole whipped his head around, but the room and the doorway were empty.

"What did you see?" the Shi'ido asked.

"I saw Tash," Zak replied. "I mean, I think it was Tash. Blond hair, braid. Except her clothes were different. She had on one of those jumpsuits the Rebels wear. She stopped in the doorway, then she ducked out as soon as I turned around."

Hoole frowned. "Disguising herself as a Rebel? I fear she has some sort of scheme. Run after her, Zak."

"What about you?"

Hoole pointed at the computer. "I want to compare any information in here with what I know of Dantooine and the Rebels. Just run after Tash and bring her back here. Don't get into any trouble yourself."

"Count on that!" Zak said, and rushed out of the room to get his sister.

Tash had watched Eyal cross the bridge for the second time. How in the galaxy could the same person have crossed the *same* bridge going in the *same* direction two times in a row?

Maybe he forgot something, she thought. *Maybe I didn't see him turn around and go back, then cross the bridge again.*

But she knew that wasn't right. She'd seen Eyal cross the bridge and head into the ruins.

Then she'd seen him do it again.

Was he twins?

But Dr'uun the Sullustan had had a twin. What was the chance of there being two sets of twins on a supposedly abandoned Rebel base?

Finding her pendant, Tash jumped to her feet and ran toward the base. Around her, the Rebels were still bustling to and fro, but she managed to stop one, a woman with curly golden hair, and ask if she'd seen any of the other visitors. The woman pointed toward the nearest building, then hurried on her way.

Tash ran to the building. It was dusty inside——so dusty that she noticed several sets of footprints on the ground. She followed them to a room where she found Hoole staring thoughtfully into a computer screen.

"Tash, there you are," Hoole murmured. "Where's Zak?"

"I don't know," Tash replied. "He was with you."

"No," Hoole answered. "He said he saw you standing in the doorway. He went to follow you."

Tash looked at her uncle as if he were crazy. "What do you mean?"

"There you are!" Zak said, hurrying back into the room. Then he stopped. "How did you change clothes so quickly?"

Tash gave him a blank stare. "Change clothes? What are you talking about?"

Zak told her what he'd seen.

John Whitman

"It wasn't me," Tash explained. "I was down by the bridge. Maybe there's a Rebel who looks like me."

"This is getting weird," Zak said. "I'm beginning to think that the Dantari were right to avoid this place."

"Perhaps," Hoole agreed. "But we are here now. Our only other option is to return to the Dantari camp, where we'd be forced to deal with Maga. I suggest that we simply stay here in this room until the ship arrives. Once on board, we will be safe."

Tash still felt the urge to return to the ruins. "Do we have to stay in here?"

"We do not seem to be in any danger here," Hoole said, "while Maga is a definite threat in the Dantari camp. Is it a problem to remain?"

Tash didn't like the idea of being so close to the ruins and the dark-side feeling she was getting, but Hoole was right. There were no better options. "No," she finally answered.

She plopped down on the floor of the computer room while Zak and Hoole continued to work at the one terminal. She didn't bother to look. She could tell from their conversation that there wasn't anything interesting.

Tash.

She felt something call to her.

Tash.

It didn't say her name exactly. It was more like a feeling of someone, or something, thinking of her. It was like feeling someone's eyes staring at your back.

Tash.

She stood up quietly. Zak and Hoole were still staring at the computer.

As quietly as she could, Tash slipped out of the room.

It was a short walk over the bridge and into the ruins. The maze of walls and giant stones wasn't quite as confusing as before. She found her way to the center of the ancient fortress with only a few wrong turns and reached the short round tower.

The feeling of the dark side grew stronger. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the room. Once more, Tash felt as if she were being watched. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Something was here.

Tash was focused on her feelings now——on her sensitivity to the dark side. As she concentrated on the Force, she began to relax. But then

Wham! Someone struck her from behind.

Tash fell forward, sprawling on the dusty stone floor of the room. Whirling around, she looked up and saw a teenage girl with blue eyes and blond hair pulled back in a neat braid.

She looked into the face of her attacker.

It was her own face.

Chapter Nine

Tash couldn't believe her eyes. It was her. For a moment she couldn't accept it. It had to be her imagination. Or maybe a hologram.

But the hologram was holding a rock in both hands. The other girl—the other *Tash*—raised the rock over her head and brought it crashing down.

At the last moment Tash rolled out of the way and the rock broke against the hard floor.

Her twin was trying to kill her!

Tash tried to scramble to her feet, but her twin was already attacking. The other girl shoved her backward, pinning her against the curved wall of the round room. The other Tash's fingers curled around her throat and started to squeeze.

Tash gagged as her air was cut off. She clutched at her attacker's hands, but the other Tash only squeezed harder. Desperately, Tash curled her hand into a fist and punched. She felt her fist make contact. The other Tash grunted and let go.

Tash slid along the wall, trying to stay out of reach of her attacker.

"Who-Who are you?" she gasped.

The other girl touched her jaw where Tash had hit her. Then she grinned. Although she was an identical copy, Tash had

already seen a difference between herself and her mysterious twin. The other girl had a wicked gleam in her eye. She started toward Tash again without answering.

"Stay back!" Tash said. She didn't know what to do. "I don't want to fight. I need to know what's going on."

The other Tash laughed. "You won't need to know once you're dead!"

She lunged at Tash again. Tash jumped away and ran for the exit. Whoever, *whatever* this other Tash was, she fought like an animal. Tash needed to put some distance between them.

She ran down one of the passages between the ruined buildings, hoping to lose the other Tash in the maze of stone blocks. But she soon heard footsteps behind her. Whichever way she turned, the other Tash followed.

Tash kept cutting corners and running around the huge stone blocks. But instead of escaping her pursuer, she made a wrong turn.

A dead end rose up in front of her. One of the stone building blocks had fallen, blocking the path. It was too high to climb over. So were the walls on either side of the passage.

Tash whirled around to turn back, but found herself looking at her mirror image once again.

"Ha!" her twin laughed. "Nowhere to run."

"Who are you?" Tash demanded.

Her twin laughed again. "Don't you know, Tash? I'm you."

"You're not me," Tash replied. "Whatever you are, you're not me."

"Oh, I'm you," the other Tash said, stalking forward. "I'm the dark side you don't want to let out. We're the same right down to the last gene. But there isn't room in this life for both of us. And since I'm stronger—you'll just have to go."

The evil Tash looked around and picked up another large rock. It was twice the size of her fist. She hefted it and smiled.

John Whitman

Tash knew this other Tash would kill her. It was willing to kill; it even *wanted* to kill. Tash was no match for that. She couldn't fight that way.

Time seemed to slow down as the other Tash inched forward. Tash thought about the words her evil twin had spoken. *I'm the dark side you don't want to let out.* Was that true? Was there something about the Jedi ruins that had shown Tash a reflection of her own dark side?

Tash glanced at the stones around her. She remembered her earlier amazement at the stones. Someone—a Jedi?—had used the Force to move these giant stones. Someone had used the Force to build this entire fortress. This evil Tash might be vicious and strong, but the real Tash had the Force, and the Force was stronger.

Tash took a deep breath. She called on the Force. Immediately she felt the touch of the dark side. It was waiting, willing to help her. She sensed that with the dark side she could wipe this impostor off the planet, erase her from the world in the blink of an eye.

No, Tash thought. I'm not like that. I won't be.

Tash pushed all thoughts of using the Force as a weapon from her mind. Instead, she thought of the Force as a shield. She had done this once before against a creature called Spore. Tash tried again now, imagining a protective screen like a ship's deflector shield all around her body. She felt the Force flow around her, and she knew it was working.

But the other Tash only smiled. Her eyelids fluttered up and down, and her eyes rolled back into her head. Tash wondered what she was doing.

Then she felt the dark side.

It smashed into her like a crashing wave. The dark-side power broke through her imaginary shield and struck her, throwing her off balance. Tash stumbled backward until she felt her back against the stone wall. She stared at her evil twin in disbelief.

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The other Tash controlled the dark side of the Force, and she was stronger.

"Now," the evil twin said, "you will die."

Chapter Ten

Quick as a light beam, the evil Tash hurled the stone.

Something—an instinct, or maybe even the Force——pulled Tash out of the way, and the rock cracked against the stone wall behind her. The evil twin reached out to grab Tash's throat, but Tash ducked and slipped past her attacker.

Tash bolted out of the dead-end passageway.

"You can't run!" the other Tash yelled. "I'll find you!"

Tash didn't listen. She ran as fast as she could, not thinking, not caring where she went as long as it was away from this evil creature.

This time, desperation and blind panic saved her. She ran so fast and so far through the ruins that the other Tash seemed to lose her. Tash could hear the evil twin yelling at her, but she was nowhere in sight.

Tash looked for an exit from the ruins. She had to tell Hoole and Zak. They had to leave this place immediately. She just had to get out of the ruins and run for the Rebel base.

Tash saw an opening in the crumbling walls and raced through it. But she was on the wrong side. Instead of the wide blue river and the bridge, Tash was looking at the prairie. She was on the far side of the ruins, the side where she'd come in earlier.

She paused. Going back through the ruins was out of the question. What about going around? That would take too much time.

That only left one direction: forward.

At least, Tash thought, I know where I can find some help.

As fast as her feet would carry her, she ran for the Dantari camp.

The camp was in shambles.

Tents had collapsed. Cooking pots had been overturned, contents spilled on the dusty ground. Near the center of the camp one of the Dantari had set up a wooden frame, a drying rack for animal skins. Now it lay broken, shattered in several pieces as though trampled by a panicked crowd.

There was not a single Dantari in sight.

"Hello?" Tash called out. But it was useless. There was no place to hide on the open prairie. If anyone had been around, she would have seen them.

"What happened here?" she said out loud.

Nearby, a flock of startled fabools flapped their way heavily into the air. Otherwise, there was no sound.

Tash had once watched some Dantari on a hunting party. She remembered how they tracked their quarry by its footprints, studying the tracks of various animals until they had chosen the one they wanted, then figuring out in which direction it had gone. She looked down at the ground, trying to study the footprints. At first it seemed useless. There were dozens, maybe hundreds, of prints of bare feet crisscrossing each other. That would be the Dantari. She spotted a few of her own, and the print of a boot she guessed was Zak's.

Then she spotted another footprint. This one was much larger, at least the size of someone like Uncle Hoole. But Hoole didn't wear boots, which meant someone else had been in the camp.

One of the Rebels?

John Whitman

Tash walked around, looking for more clues, but found nothing. She could make no sense of what happened. She was still walking around, staring at the ground, when a huge figure rose up out of the grass in front of her. She stifled a cry.

It was Maga.

The Dantari pointed a thick finger at Tash. "You are to blame!"

Chapter Eleven

Tash was too exhausted and bewildered to respond. She had no idea what Maga meant. All she knew was that he had tried to kill her—or at least he had hoped she would become lost or injured in the Jedi ruins. Since then, her entire world seemed to have turned upside down. Tash wanted to scream and yell at Maga.

She held back. She knew it wouldn't do any good. Maga would not understand. Besides, there was a wild look in his eyes and she didn't want him to become violent.

As calmly as she could, she said, "What are you talking about?"

"You came here!" Maga thundered. "You brought the other humans. You brought the man with no face!"

Man with no face? What was Maga talking about? She wanted to sit down in the dust and cry, but she couldn't. She had to stay focused.

"I haven't been back to camp since I went into the ruins, Maga," she said firmly.

"You lie. With my own eyes I saw you. You brought the man with no face. The elders welcomed him because he was with you. Then he took them all prisoner!"

Tash swallowed. "Someone took all the Dantari prisoner?"

John Whitman

"Your friends! The other humans and the dark man with no face."

Tash groaned. If Maga said that one more time she was going to scream.

"It wasn't me, I swear," she said as calmly as she could. "Maga, you told Zak there was something strange about those Jedi ruins."

"The place of fallen rocks," the Dantari said.

"Right, the place of fallen rocks," she agreed. "Well, things *have* been strange ever since we went in there. I was attacked by someone who looks just like me. That must be the person who helped kidnap your people." She blinked. "Why weren't you captured?"

Maga scoffed. "I am the garoo, wise man of my people. It is my job to know things. I did not trust the others from the beginning. But no one would listen to me. They believed only *you*." He spat that last word like a curse.

"It wasn't me," Tash repeated. Her voice was almost a whisper.

Once, in school, Tash had been accused of cheating on an exam. She knew she was innocent, but her teacher had been so sure of her guilt that Tash had almost begun to doubt herself.

She had that feeling again now, only it was worse, because someone who looked like her actually *was* committing these acts.

Tash felt a pang of guilt. Even if her mysterious evil twin was causing the trouble, Tash knew she was partly to blame. Because of Tash and her uncle, the Dantari had stopped respecting their tribal wise man.

"When the elders would not hear my warning, I left camp in anger," Maga explained. "Then I saw the strangers attack. The dark man with no face, he had power. Greater than a garoo. Greater than you or Hoole. He captured many."

"Where did they go?" Tash asked.

"Some of my people fled. The strangers chase them. Hunt them." Maga's brow wrinkled. "You ask like you do not know. You were here."

"I *wasn't* here," she insisted. "You have to believe me, Maga," she pleaded. "You told Zak there was something dangerous about the Jedi ruins. What do you know?"

Maga's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "I know many things. Wisdom passed down from garoo to garoo. This keeps my people safe."

"Please tell me," she said again. "What do your garoo ancestors tell you about those ruins?"

Maga stared at her as though his dark eyes could see right into her mind. For the second time, Tash saw past the anger that had built up between them. This time she saw why he had been chosen as garoo. She could see his mind at work, judging her words, judging her expression, reaching an intelligent decision. He wasn't using the Force or any other power, but he was probing her just the same, using only his wits. She realized that she had to stop thinking of him as less intelligent just because his people wore skins and hunted with primitive weapons.

"Garoo learn to see," Maga said. "Learn to judge truth by looking at eyes, hearing words. I think you are telling the truth."

He paused a moment to gather himself.

"Long ago," he began, "in the time of the garoo four before me, offworlders came here in flying machines."

"Was that when the Rebels built their base?" she asked.

"No, before. Many seasons before that. Then there was only place of fallen rocks. These offworlders flew there. They had great power. Like you, only greater. They searched. They went away. After that, strange things happen."

"What things?" she asked.

Maga shook his head. "The garoo stories are not clear. Sometimes Dantari vanish in the place of fallen rocks. Sometimes one Dantari enters, but two leave."

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Tash's eyes widened. So the ruins did have something to do with her evil twin!

Maga continued. "After several seasons, these strange things do not happen. But the garoo forbid Dantari to enter the fallen rocks again. Our tribe camped away from fallen rocks. Then no bad things happen. Even when other offworlders came to build their stone camp, the place of fallen rocks was silent. But then, last season, when the Dantari camped here, it happened again." He pointed to the sky. "Ships came down. They landed at the place of fallen rocks: And after that, all was different."

"How?" Tash asked.

"No Dantari go to rocks anymore, so nothing like before," Maga answered. "But soon, offworlders appear in old stone camp."

"You mean at the Rebel base? People flew there?" Maga shook his head. "No. No ships come. But offworlders appeared. Where from? Even the garoo does not know. The man with no face came first. He tried to trap the Dantari, but Dantari escape into fields where he cannot find us. Then other strangers appear."

Tash took a moment to sort things out. The Jedi ruins were thousands of years old. But some time in the more recent past, people with "great power"—Tash knew they must have been Jedi—came to the ruins for a while, then left. After that, the Rebels came and went. And then, less than a year ago, more offworlders had come. Soon after that, Rebels started filling the old base again.

Obviously, activity near the ruins triggered something—Tash didn't know if it was the Force or some hidden technology—that was causing these weird happenings. But what? And why?

"I need Uncle Hoole," she said. "Maga, will you come with me to the Rebel base? My uncle is there."

Maga took a step back. "No. My people do not cross the river. And I must search for any that escaped."

"But——"

"Do not question the garoo," Maga said proudly. "I must take care of my people." With that, he turned and trotted off. She watched him for a moment, amazed at how quickly and quietly he moved his large body through the tall grasses.

Tash turned toward the river. Crossing the river meant crossing the bridge. And that meant she might run into her dark-side self again. But she had to risk it.

Tash approached the bridge cautiously. The ruins were to her right, and they seemed deserted. But on the far side of the bridge, a crowd had gathered. There were quite a few Rebels standing on the open ground between the bridge and their base, crowding around Uncle Hoole.

Tash made her way through the crowd toward her uncle. One of the people she bumped into was Eyal.

"What's going on?" she said.

"Your uncle says that your ship is making its approach," Eyal replied. "It should be here in a moment.

We are very excited. The timing is perfect. Our leader is on his way back in from his collections."

"Great," Tash said. "Excuse me."

She pushed her way deeper into the crowd until she found Hoole. The Shi'ido was scanning the sky, waiting for the remote-controlled *Shroud* to appear.

"Uncle Hoole, you've got to listen to me," she said. "There's something very wrong with this place——"

"I know," Hoole replied softly. "But there is nothing we can do but get aboard the ship as fast as possible. I did not want all these people around, but they insisted on following me."

"Where's Zak?" Tash asked, realizing he was missing.

"That I do *not* know," her uncle replied. She saw a wrinkle on his forehead, and knew what it meant. Hoole was worried. "I could not locate him. But once the ship arrives we will use its sensors to find him."

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"Is it almost here?" asked a voice Tash recognized. It was Eyal. But she had just seen him on the far side of the crowd!

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"Over there," he said, pointing away from the bridge.

"Didn't I just see you by the bridge?" she demanded.

Eyal shook his head. "It couldn't have been me."

Tash was bewildered. How could Eyal be in two places at once? "But I just——"

"There it is," Hoole said, pointing up. A silvery gleam appeared in the sky, growing larger. At the same time, the distant whine of sublight engines reached their ears.

"Well timed!" Eyal said. "Our leader is just arriving." He pointed back to the bridge. Over the heads of the crowd, Tash could see a long line of people marching toward them from the far side of the river. They were marching in single file. The leader was dressed in dark clothing, and even from this distance, Tash could tell that the others were Dantari. Her stomach tightened into a knot.

"Just a few more seconds," Hoole muttered. He was holding the remote control in his hands, watching its readings as the ship descended.

"Uncle Hoole, there's something wrong here," she started to say.

"Almost here," Hoole muttered, almost to himself. The ship was nearly on top of them. Its landing gear lowered, and it descended slowly toward the ground. The crowd parted to give it plenty of room. Only a few hundred feet to go.

"This is a great day!" Eyal said. "Our leader will finally be able to get off this planet!"

"Uncle Hoole, look!" Tash said, her voice rising in terror.

They both looked back at the bridge. Now that the marchers were closer, Tash could see why they marched in such a straight line. They were all bound at the neck, one after the other, by a long rope. Tash knew they were the Dantari of Maga's tribe, and she could see that they were prisoners.

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But that wasn't what terrified her.

The man in the dark clothing who led the line of captives was clearly visible now.

It was Darth Vader.

Chapter Twelve

Darth Vader was here.

On Dantooine.

As soon as he crossed the bridge, several of the Rebels hurried to take control of the Dantari prisoners. Vader himself strode forward, his dark cape swirling behind him. Tash was frozen. All she could do was stare at Vader's breath mask. It reminded her of a skull.

The dark man with no face, Maga had said.

Of course.

"At last," the Dark Lord of the Sith boomed, "a ship to take me off this accursed world."

The spell over Tash seemed to break. "Uncle Hoole. The ship!" she shouted.

Hoole, who had apparently been just as stunned to see Vader, realized what Tash meant. Raising his remote control, Hoole punched in a command.

"Stop him!" Vader ordered, and a dozen hands grabbed at Hoole. But they were too late. The Shi'ido had managed to enter a new command, and the *Shroud* reversed direction just a few meters above the ground. It began to rise and, turning slowly in its place, the ship began to fly away.

"No!" Vader bellowed. "My ship!"

The Dark Lord lunged forward. His followers scattered to let him through. Something caught Tash's eye as Vader stormed forward. The Dark Lord's appearance was different. She didn't know what it was, and she had no time to think as the Dark Lord reached Hoole and snatched at the remote control. Hoole struggled with him briefly, but Vader wrenched the control pad from his hands. The Dark Lord raised it toward the departing ship and punched the keypad. Nothing happened.

"It's encoded!" Vader roared. From behind his mask he snarled at Hoole. "Give me the code."

"No," Hoole replied.

In a smooth, swift motion, Vader drew his lightsaber and ignited it with a loud *thrummm!* He held it over his head, ready to strike the Shi'ido down. "The code."

Hoole stiffened. Tash could see that he wanted to move but he seemed to be stuck in place, as though held there by Vader's will.

"No," the Shi'ido repeated.

Vader struck.

Tash screamed as the lightsaber came down in a flashing arc. The light blade passed cleanly through Hoole's midsection and came out the other side.

Hoole winced. Then he opened his eyes and looked down. He touched the spot where the lightsaber had passed through him.

He was untouched.

It was at that moment that Tash realized what was bothering her about Vader. It was his armor. It looked similar to the armor that Vader wore, but it didn't seem to function. Like the makeshift starship, it was a cheap imitation.

"Tash, run!" the Shi'ido yelled. A moment later he shape-shifted into the form of a bantha.

The power of Hoole's voice set Tash's feet in motion. She shoved her way through the crowd of Rebels, who were focused on the bantha that had appeared among them. Breaking free of

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the mob, she ran across the bridge and toward the only place she knew to hide.

The Jedi ruins.

She didn't care if she saw her dark-side self again. Her evil twin was nothing compared to Vader. She only hoped that Hoole could escape as easily. Tash heard a few voices call after her, but she had a head start. She reached the outer ring of stones and entered the ruins.

Tash meant to lose herself in the confusing maze of the abandoned fortress, but her feet seemed to carry her automatically to the center of the ruins. The round building was in front of her before she knew it. Knowing the room was empty, Tash started to turn away, looking for a better hiding place, when voices drifted toward her. She ducked inside the building.

Pressing herself against the wall near the door, Tash caught her breath and tried to think. She was alone. Zak had vanished, and Hoole was either hiding or captured by these so-called Rebels. And Vader was here.

But what had happened to Vader's lightsaber? Why hadn't it cut Hoole in half?

Tash knew the answer. The saber was a fake. She'd seen the light beam pass right through Hoole without hurting him. It wasn't a real saber—it was a mocked-up version, just like the ridiculously mocked-up starship these castaways were building.

It was obvious to Tash that these people were impostors. They weren't real Rebels—they couldn't be. But if they were lying to her, why hadn't she felt it in the Force? In the past, she'd often gotten a sinking feeling in her stomach when people were lying to her and meant to do her or her family harm. Why hadn't the Force warned her about these strangers?

Thinking of Eyal and the others, Tash knew the answer. They believed they were Rebels. Whatever he really was, Eyal thought he was working for the Rebellion. She had seen the honesty in

his eyes when he spoke. *Almost*, she thought, *the way Maga saw the honesty in my eyes when I spoke.*

So these stranded beings thought they were Rebels, but really weren't.

Why do they think they are, though? Tash wondered. *Did Vader brainwash them?* But that wouldn't explain where they came from. Maga had said "the man with no face"—Vader——had appeared first, then the others. But they hadn't come in ships.

Could Vader have made them somehow? Created them, using the dark side of the Force?

No, she decided. *That isn't possible.*

But he could have made them some other way. Maybe they weren't really alive. Maybe they were androids of some kind. That would explain why she'd seen several copies of the same person. And it would also explain why she couldn't tell if they were lying. Maybe they were programmed to believe they were Rebels. If Vader was building androids of some kind, it might even explain why Tash had seen a copy of herself.

It was the best answer Tash could come up with. But it didn't solve all her riddles.

For instance, why would Vader carry a fake lightsaber? And how had the second most powerful being in the galaxy become stranded on a barren planet?

Tash heard voices.

She looked around for a stick or a stone, anything she could use as a weapon.

That was when she noticed the crack in the floor.

It started on the spot where her evil twin had dashed the stone. The rock had shattered, but it had also left its mark on the floor. There was a crack about one meter long.

Not a crack. A line. A very thin, very straight line. The impact of the rock hadn't made this line. She was surprised she hadn't noticed it before, but without the broken stone to draw attention to that particular spot on the floor, it was hardly visible.

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Tash could see that it was a door. Dropping to her knees, she felt around for some sort of lever. The line was too small for her fingers to fit into, so she ran her fingernail down the length of the line. At the very end she felt something click.

A section of the floor sank, revealing a stairway leading down into darkness. Tash took it.

When she'd gone a few steps, the stone slid back into place. For a moment she was blinded by the darkness, but as her eyes adjusted, she realized there was dim light below. Tash crept down the stairs, counting as she went. When she reached the twenty-fifth step, she knew she was at the bottom.

She was in a long, narrow chamber that was almost a tunnel. The chamber walls were lined with vats filled with bubbling green fluid. They reminded her of the bacta tanks doctors used to heal injured people, but something told her these weren't bacta tanks.

Tash sensed movement.

She crouched, trying to hide in the shadows as something passed nearby. It was a droid of some kind. It had a small triangular head with two lenses for eyes. Its head swiveled on a long, thin neck attached to a squat body that rolled on wheels. The machine had several mechanical arms. She could tell by its rickety movements that it was very old. The droid almost passed her by. Then it stopped, turned, and rolled toward Tash, but it didn't threaten her. The droid's eyes lit up in a light blue color as it sent some sort of scanning beam onto Tash's arm.

"Genetic material analysis," the droid said to itself. "This sample has already been harvested. Vats two-two-six through two-four-one."

The droid then looked up at Tash, and another blue beam settled onto her forehead. When it did, Tash felt the same electrical sensation she'd felt when she first entered the room above. She was being scanned. "Mind scan in progress. This brain pattern has already been harvested."

The droid then lost interest and turned away.

Tash followed the droid into the room. What did it mean by *harvested*?

She looked at the nearest vat. It was number 222. Tash walked down the row until she found number 226. She looked into the tank filled with green, bubbling slime. There was something bobbing inside.

She leaned over to get a closer look, and saw a small figure curled up like a baby, floating in the liquid. Its back was to her so that all she could see were its shoulders and a thick mane of hair. But then the figure bobbed in the bubbling goo and rolled toward her. She saw two familiar looking eyes, wide open, staring at her through the slime-bath.

Tash had seen those eyes in the mirror every day of her life.

Tash was again staring at herself.

Chapter Thirteen

Clones.

Tash was in a room full of cloning tanks. And this tank, and the next, and the one after that, and maybe others, were full of clones of Tash herself

"How can that be?" she whispered to herself. She knew she was right. She'd once learned about cloning from an Ithorian named Fandomar. Cloning technology was possible. Scientists could take DNA from anything—blood or hair or a few flakes of skin—and use the genetic code inside to grow an exact copy of the original person. But it took years to let the clone grow, and Tash had only been on Dantooine for a few weeks!

"Query?"

Tash nearly jumped. The droid had come up behind her. It must have heard her speak.

"Query?" the droid asked again.

"Urn, yes," she said. "How can these clones be grown so quickly?"

The droid paused. "Information on rapid cloning process is restricted." The droid turned away.

Rapid cloning. Obviously Vader had developed some sort of quick cloning method that allowed him to grow clones not in

years, or even months or days, but hours! But why was Vader here?

Tash had a thousand questions, but she knew she would get no response from the droid. While it obviously wasn't programmed to guard against intruders, it wasn't going to be helpful, either.

She looked around for anything that might prove useful. But aside from the cloning tanks and the droid, there wasn't much else in the room. Just a container full of flight suits. Tash guessed that when the real Rebels had vacated the base, they'd left their laundry behind. Now Vader was using it to clothe his clone army.

She was about to turn away from the container when she had an idea. Quickly, she pulled out a flight suit that would fit her, shucked off her clothes, tossed them aside, and slipped into her new outfit.

Just in time. Stone ground against stone at the top of the stairs. Tash scurried into the shadows beside the staircase and held her breath.

Two Rebels came down. They were identical, clones of the same person. "There's no way she could have found her way down here," said the first clone.

"The leader ordered us to check everywhere," said clone number two.

"Fine. Then ask the droid if it's seen anything," said the first clone.

"Why? All that droid'll do is scan us and say it already has our genetic material."

"Ask it anyway."

While they were bickering, Tash slipped out of the shadows and hurried up the stairs just before the trapdoor closed. She was back in the round room.

Tash poked her head outside. She could hear a few distant voices, but nothing nearby. She guessed that the clones had swept through the ruins right on her heels. When they couldn't

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find her, they'd fanned out onto the prairie, hoping to track her down.

As quietly as possible, Tash made her way through the maze of the ruins. She needed to form a plan, and to do that she needed someplace to hide, someplace where she could think. Suddenly she heard steady, unhurried footsteps approaching around a nearby corner. She pressed herself into the shadow of a fallen stone and listened as the footsteps grew closer.

A tall figure appeared, dressed in a long robe, with a concerned look on his gray face.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash said in an excited whisper. She jumped out of the shadows and raced toward him.

"Tash," Hoole said calmly.

"Thank the Force," she said. She collapsed into his arms. Hoole caught her and held her on her feet. "I'm so glad you got away!"

Hoole looked down at her. "I didn't get away. At least, the original Hoole didn't." His grip tightened. "And neither will you."

Chapter Fourteen

Hoole was a clone, too!

Tash tried to jerk her arms free, but the clone Hoole's grip was too strong.

"Don't bother struggling," the clone said. "Or I'll shape-change into a creature strong enough to crush you like a blumfruit."

Tash stopped struggling. "Please, let me go."

"No. Come with me." The clone started to drag her into the ruins.

The clone spoke like Hoole. It even had his inflection. If it was that much like Hoole, maybe she could reason with it.

"Uncle Hoole," she said. "Please, it's me, Tash. You don't have to do what Vader says. Think a minute!"

The clone Shi'ido looked at her with disdain. "Do not be foolish. I am Hoole, but not the Hoole you know. Our leader has taken care of that. I am everything that is strong about Hoole, with none of his petty weaknesses. I am invincible."

Just as he finished the word, something hard slammed down on his skull and the Hoole clone dropped to the ground like a sack of nerf wool. As he fell, Tash turned to see who had sneaked up behind them.

"Zak!"

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Her brother stood holding a chunk of stone block in his hand and grinning from ear to ear. "That'll teach Vader," Zak joked. "I like Uncle Hoole, but one's enough to deal with."

"Where were you?" Tash asked.

"Caught," her brother explained. "I found some computer records that told me what was going on, and Vader's clones grabbed me before I could tell Uncle Hoole. The real one, that is." He tapped the unconscious clone Hoole with his toe. "But I guess you and Uncle Hoole caused some commotion near the bridge. When everyone started chasing you, I was able to get free."

"Have you seen the real Uncle Hoole?" she asked.

"No," Zak answered. "But I hope he escaped."

"We've got to find him!" Tash said.

"First things first," Zak said. He pulled something out of his pocket and held it out for Tash.

"The remote control for the ship!" Tash cheered.

Zak answered, "Yep. You call the *Shroud*. I'm going to see if I can find anything useful in this clone's pockets."

"Right," Tash said. She took the remote control from Zak's hands. She knew the security code. Hoole had given it to both of them just to be safe. She punched in the first few digits.

Then she stopped.

"Zak?" she said.

"Yeah?" her brother answered. He was busy searching through the pockets of the clone Hoole's robe, finding nothing.

"Why didn't *you* just call the ship after you escaped?"

Zak stopped his searching and looked up. "I wanted to find you and make sure you were all right. You know, good brother stuff"

"You could have found me more easily with the scanners on board the *Shroud*," Tash pointed out.

Zak scratched his head. "I guess you're right. I didn't think about it."

Tash clenched her teeth. Since when did Zak not think about using technology?

Tash handed the remote activator back to Zak. "Why don't you call the ship?"

Zak stared down at the remote without taking it. "Why? You could have done it by now."

"No," she insisted. "You do it."

Zak sighed and looked at her as if she were a disobedient child. "Oh, well, we'll just have to do this the hard way."

As he spoke, several dozen figures stepped out of the shadows cast by the huge stones and appeared from around corners. Tash looked at them and swallowed a startled cry. Looking back at her were dozens of images of herself, and dozens of versions of Zak.

An army of clones.

As one, the massed clones surged forward.

Just as she had when the earlier clone hurled the rock, Tash felt herself move without thinking. Instead of running, she jumped up onto a stone wall to her left. Somehow she found a foothold and scrambled to the top. But as she did, she lost her grip on the remote activator, and it clattered back down to the ground.

"No!" she said, but she couldn't stop. Already some of the clones were trying to follow her up the wall.

Tash tried to lower herself down the other side as she heard a Tash clone say, "She won't get far without her ship. Spread out! Let's find her."

Hanging from the edge of the wall, Tash looked down. The ground seemed far away. How had she jumped so high?

Hurry! she told herself. The clones would be coming around the end of the wall at any moment.

But Tash couldn't make herself let go. The ground seemed as far away as the stars. Steeling herself, she promised she would count to three, then let go.

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But she didn't have to. The wall was old and decayed by weather. Before she could loosen her grip, a whole section of the top gave way. Tash fell, hitting the ground hard. She felt gravel and stone rain down on her. She felt larger stones batter her shoulders. She felt something heavy slam into her head.

Then she didn't feel anything at all.

Tash woke with a sneeze. Every time she tried to breathe, dust filled her nose. And as she woke, she realized just how hard it was to breathe at all.

She opened her eyes. Darkness surrounded her. She was lying down, but something heavy lay on top of her. With effort, she pushed herself up to a sitting position and felt a mound of sand and gravel slide off her arms and down into her clothes. Her head rang, and she felt a lump throbbing behind her ear.

Near her head lay a small chunk of stone. And only a few centimeters in front of her face sat another chunk, much bigger and very jagged.

She had fallen off the wall when it collapsed. The debris had followed and one of the stone chunks had knocked her out. If it had been the larger piece... She didn't want to think about it.

Tash climbed to her feet, using the wall for support. Twilight was approaching. This had to be the longest day of her life.

She was covered in dust, and she could feel more sand sliding down the inside of her clothes. The clothes she wore startled her. Why was she wearing this jumpsuit? Where were her own clothes? She couldn't remember changing... but her head felt as if it would explode, and she couldn't think very clearly.

Tash listened. For a moment she heard nothing. No sounds of pursuit, no shouting voices. All was quiet.

Then she heard the crying. It came faintly at first, then more loudly. Walking on tiptoes, Tash followed the sound. Slowly, cautiously, she peeked around a corner.

She saw herself sitting on a chunk of stone, her knees drawn up to her chest, sobbing. This Tash wasn't wearing a jumpsuit. She was wearing Tash's own white overshirt and trousers.

What was going on here?

Tash thought she ought to run, but she was too weak from her fall. If the clones were going to capture her at this moment, there wasn't much she could do about it.

Instead, she staggered toward the other Tash. "Why are you crying?" she asked.

The other Tash jumped as though she'd been stung. As soon as she saw Tash, she backed away, pleading, "Don't hurt me; please don't hurt me!"

Tash shook the cobwebs out of her head. "I'm not going to hurt you. Tell me why you're crying."

The other Tash sobbed, "Because they're going to find me."

"Who?"

"The clones," the other girl answered.

Tash blinked. "But you're a clone."

"No, I'm not," the other girl said, "I'm the real Tash Arranda!"

Chapter Fifteen

"You're not the real Tash," Tash said to her twin.

"Of course I am," the other girl said. "Don't you think I'd know if I were a clone?"

"I guess you don't know," Tash said, "because, I'm sorry to tell you, I'm the real Tash."

The other girl sobbed. "Don't be ridiculous. Look at you."

Tash shrugged. "We look alike."

"But your clothes," the other Tash insisted. "You're wearing a jumpsuit just like the rest of them. And I'm wearing my own clothes."

Tash scowled. What was happening? The blow to her head was making the last few minutes all run together.

"There she is!" someone yelled.

Tash turned around to see a horde of Arranda clones charging at them. It was too late to run. All she could do was brace herself against the mob.

But all the Zak and Tash clones parted and flowed around her, descending on the Tash who sat on the rock. The crying Tash let out a shriek, then vanished behind a pile of bodies.

It was over in a few seconds. Tash barely had time to register the swarming clones before they backed away from their victim.

Tash saw herself lying, unmoving, on the ground. There was no life in her. Tash let out a strangled yell and backed away in horror. It was like a nightmare, seeing her own body dropped into the dust.

One of the Zaks looked at her, then at one of the Tashes. "Could we have gotten the wrong one?" he asked.

"The clothes," another Zak groaned. "We forgot about the clothes."

Tash didn't wait to hear the answer. She was off and running again.

If it hadn't been for the confusing design of the original Jedi fortress, Tash would have been captured in the first few minutes. But there were so many twists and turns, so many dead ends caused by toppled stones, that one wrong turn took her pursuers down a completely different path. Still, they kept up the chase. Now and then one of the clones would spot her down a corridor, but she was able to stay one step ahead, climbing over a wall or ducking between two fallen pillars, and slip away. She was trying to make her way to the edge of the ruins, but every time she reached the edge, one of her enemies would spot her, forcing her back into the maze.

Tash ran, but her steps began to slow. The throbbing in her head was subsiding, but the memory of the other Tash lingered. Why had the other Tash claimed to be the real thing? It was ridiculous, of course. Tash knew who she was. Yet the other girl had seemed certain. And she was wearing the right clothes.

Tash tried to remember changing her clothes. Hadn't she put on a jumpsuit? Maybe. Or maybe not.

Once Tash opened her mind to doubt, the confusion of the day poured in. She allowed a terrible thought to creep in. *Am I a clone?*

"Ridiculous," she said out loud.

That's what the other clone said, too.

"But I'm not a clone," she insisted. "Besides, all the clones are loyal to Vader. I'm not."

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Maybe the cloning process is imperfect, the doubting part of herself replied. *Maybe you're an imperfect clone.*

Tash tried to push the doubt from her mind. She was who she was. Nothing could change that. But the clones seemed to feel exactly the same way.

Tash stopped. She heard voices approaching, but she didn't move. Would it matter if she were a clone? Wouldn't she be the same person?

No, she realized. A clone wouldn't have her experiences, her life. A clone wouldn't feel the way she felt, wouldn't know what it was like to lose a mother and father.

At the thought of her mother and father, Tash put her hand to her chest. She felt something hard and firm beneath her fingertips.

Her pendant.

Tash pulled at the chain around her neck until the pendant slid free of her jumpsuit. Vader could clone her body. He could even scan her mind. But he couldn't copy everything. Not Tash's love for her parents. No clone could feel that way.

In a split second, Tash recalled her earlier wish to talk with her parents, to ask them how she would know her true self. Now she knew what they would have told her. Emotions like love and kindness and caring—the same feelings that allowed her to use the light side of the Force—would help her see herself clearly.

But Tash's resolution came a little too late. Vader's clones had found her.

Zaks and Tashes surrounded her. Tash saw instantly that flight was impossible. So she didn't run. She tucked the pendant back into her jumpsuit. Then she charged full speed into the mob of clones.

Chapter Sixteen

Tash plunged into the of the clone army. She pushed her way through until she was in the very middle of the crowd.

Then she grabbed the nearest clone Tash by the wrist and shouted, "I've got her! I've got her!"

"Good work!" one of the Zaks yelled.

"Huh?" said the other Tash, trying to pull away.

"Help me! She's a fighter!" Tash screamed. Several clones grabbed at the captured Tash clone.

"All right!" said a Zak clone. "Let's get her back to the leader. He'll want to question her with the others."

The cloned Tash protested, but her struggles only convinced the others that she was their target. They grabbed her arms and legs and lifted her off the ground. As she kicked and fought with them, they carried her out of the ruins.

Tash followed, hiding her smile.

The small clone army hurried across the bridge and into the Rebel base. Tash followed them up to the central building, the one that housed the mock starship.

Inside, Tash saw that two pilot chairs had been pulled out of the ship and set up on the floor. Zak and Uncle Hoole had been strapped into these chairs. Both of them were dressed in clone jumpsuits. Their own clothes, Tash realized, must have been

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taken by clones. In front of each of them stood a droid similar to the one Tash had seen in the cloning chamber. Vader stood over the two droids, making adjustments to their circuits.

One of the Zak clones approached Vader. "My lord, we've caught the other one."

Vader looked up from his work. "I don't need her. I've decided to use a mindscan to get the information I need. Dispose of her."

The clones nodded and turned away. The captured Tash clone redoubled her struggles, but more hands grabbed her. In the commotion, the real Tash slipped behind the landing gear of the derelict starship to watch.

"You have given me an invaluable gift," Vader said to Zak and Hoole. "The cloning technology is a powerful tool. With it I can create an instant army of clones. The mindscan that accompanies the cloning process allows me to instantly imbue each clone with a personality. But at first I had little to work with. Only the handful of DNA samples I could scrape together from this abandoned station. They were only skin and hair samples, with no mind-scans to accompany the genetic growth. The result was a race of idiots. I left them to their own devices. I had tried several times to capture Dantari from which to make clones, but they proved too elusive. And then you arrived."

Hoole struggled against his bonds. Vader turned to him. "This is your last warning. If you attempt to shape-change, I'll crush the boy with a single thought."

Hoole became still. Vader continued. "Now you have provided me with your DNA and a complete mindscan. With similar scans of the boy and girl, I was able to clone the girl, and that clone allowed me to lure the Dantari into a trap. With the Dantari DNA, I can build a race of powerful soldiers and slaves."

Hiding behind the landing gear, Tash realized what had happened. The cloning machinery was set up beneath the round room. Their minds were scanned when they entered the room, and the mindscan was stored by the droids. Then, somehow,

Vader had acquired samples of their DNA. She didn't know how he'd done it, but it would have been easy. With the mindscan and the genetic material, Vader had created his clones.

"Now all I need," the Dark Lord said, "is your ship. Then I will be able to leave this accursed planet. I want the code to your remote activator."

"We won't tell you," Zak said defiantly.

"I don't intend to ask," the Dark Lord said. "I will take the information. A simple adjustment to the mind-scanners of these processing droids should make them nearly as effective as the probe on a torture droid. And even more painful."

Vader flipped a switch on each droid. Blue beams of light shot from the droids' faces and fell on Zak and Hoole. Both captives immediately winced in pain and fought against the straps that held them down.

Tash knew she had to do something. But she also knew that Vader could squash her like a bug. Maybe if she moved fast enough, she could surprise him

She never had a chance to find out. A dark figure suddenly stepped out of the shadows. The figure had broad shoulders and carried a stone ax. Tash recognized him immediately.

"Offworlder!" Maga bellowed. "Free my people!"

Vader laughed. "Another primitive savage for my labor camps."

"I am the garoo of my people," Maga growled, advancing toward the Dark Lord of the Sith.

"You are an insect," Vader replied. He raised one hand, and Tash felt the dark side of the Force churn outward. Maga was hurled through the air and slammed against the wall. Growling, the Dantari stubbornly climbed to his feet.

"You are strong," Vader said. "This should prove interesting." He took a step toward Maga and raised his hand again. Again, Maga was hurled like a rag doll across the room.

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Tash saw her chance. She bolted forward, reaching the two mindscanning droids in a few steps, and shut them down with a quick motion.

"Tash!" Zak said weakly. "Prime..."

"Is Vader distracted?" Hoole demanded.

"Yes," Tash replied, seeing him with Maga in his grip.

Instantly, Hoole's body seemed to melt. The straps that held him tight went limp as the Shi'ido transformed into a small monkey-lizard and slipped out of the bonds. By the time Tash had freed Zak, Hoole had recovered his own shape. Vader was still toying with Maga.

"Come on!" Tash said.

"The remote activator," Hoole whispered.

"Looking for this?"

They all looked up. Standing before them was another Hoole, holding the small black datapad that would summon the *Shroud*.

"Give me that," the real Hoole said threateningly.

"I'm afraid not," said the clone Hoole. "This belongs to Hoole. And I am Hoole."

"We shall see," the real Hoole said.

The two Hooles surged toward one another, but they moved so quickly that Tash could hardly follow. Her uncle shifted into the shape of a many-horned lizard, while the other Hoole transformed into some sort of giant snake. But by the time they clashed, each of them had morphed two or three more times, until the two combatants were a quivering mass of shrieking, shape-changing flesh.

Tash was awestruck. She had never seen her uncle so enraged, nor had she ever seen two Shi'ido fight. *No wonder Hoole always remains so calm*, she thought.

"Tash," Zak said urgently.

"What?" she asked. "I'm trying to watch, so we know which Hoole is which."

"I think we have bigger problems," Zak rasped. "Look."

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She followed his gaze to the entryway. There, in the fading light of the long afternoon, stood another Dark Vader.

Chapter Seventeen

Unlike the Vader they had already met, this Vader's armor was real. And he was accompanied by two stormtroopers in white armor. Vader strode forward. His black face mask swiveled, taking in the scene for a moment. Then he turned to his troopers.

"You two," he said. "I want all these prisoners taken alive. Set your blasters for stun." Then Vader turned back to the Arrandas.

"You," he said, recognizing Zak and Tash. "You children seem determined to interfere in my affairs. I shall make sure that never happens again." Tash and Zak both started to back away, but Vader held up one finger and they both froze, held in place by the power of the dark side.

Vader glanced at the two Hooles locked in mortal combat. "Enough," the Dark Lord commanded.

Tash felt ripples of the dark side extend outward and grasp the two Shi'ido. They were dragged apart as though by invisible hands. "I see the mystery of the Jedi ruins has been discovered. Cloning technology. Interesting," the Dark Lord mused. "I shall have to——"

Vader stopped. His black mask was no longer pointed toward Zak or Tash or either of the two Hooles. He had seen his clone.

Without a word, Vader let his dark power fall away from his prisoners as he focused all his attention on the other Vader.

The other Vader sensed his twin's attention. He forgot about Maga and allowed the battered Dantari to collapse to the floor. The two Vaders squared off in the center of the huge room. Tash sensed the power of the dark side swirling around them like an invisible mist.

The sheer power of the two Dark Lords meeting was irresistible, and Tash felt herself drawn to it like a moth to a flame.

"A clone of me," the real Vader growled. "You must be destroyed."

"I am. Darth Vader!" the cloned Vader said. "You cannot defeat me."

The clone Vader lunged forward, surprising the real Vader with a physical assault.

But Vader slapped his opponent's hands away. At the same time, a container in one corner of the room rose of its own accord and hurtled toward the Vader clone. The clone ducked away just in time.

As the two Vaders circled each other, Tash tried to keep track of them. One, she knew, wore imitation armor, probably built from scrap metal lying around the Rebel base. But in the dim light of the hangar, it was difficult to tell which was which.

The two stormtroopers seemed to agree. They stood still, awestruck, and one of the Hooles sensed this. Shifting into the form of a wampa ice beast, he swiped one giant paw across the side of the trooper's head, knocking him out and sending his blaster rifle clattering across the room. As the other trooper turned, surprised to see a monster appear out of nowhere, the other Hoole caught him from behind. Shifting into a dewback's shape, he whipped his thick tail around, sending the trooper sprawling. His blaster clattered across the ground, stopping right at Tash's feet.

She picked it up and pointed——at two identical Hooles.

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"Tash, this may be our only chance," one of the Hooles said. "I have the remote. Let's go."

"Do not listen to him, Tash!" the other Hoole said. "He is the clone."

"Zak?" Tash said, looking for help. She kept pointing the blaster at one Shi'ido and then the other.

Her brother shook his head. "I don't know what to do. But we'd better do it fast. One of those Vaders will win, and then he's coming after us."

One of the Hooles said, "I did not have the remote activator. He did. I'm the real Hoole."

"No," said the other. "I took it from him. I am the real Hoole."

"What do we do?" Zak asked. "How do we tell them apart?"

Tash stared at them both. The two Hooles looked exactly alike, their long, gray faces staring at her with dark, stern eyes. She knew that the mindscan would have given the clone Hoole most, if not all, of the real Hoole's memories, so she couldn't test him that way.

A large figure loomed behind her. Tash's heart skipped a beat, thinking one of the Vaders was after her. When she turned, however, she saw the bruised figure of Maga. "I must free my people," he said weakly.

"They're locked in the computer room," Zak said. "We heard the clones talk about it. It's the building closest to the bridge."

Maga gave a faint nod and staggered toward the door.

"Wait!" Tash said. She recalled how Maga had stared at her, judging her. "Maga, please. Help us. Which Hoole is the real one?"

Maga shrugged. "You are the garoo of your tribe," he said to Tash. "Learn to see. Learn to hear." He limped out of the room.

"Tash, we are wasting time," one of the Hooles said. "Give me the blaster. Then we can get the remote activator and leave this place."

"Shoot him, Tash," said the other. "The Vaders will not keep each other busy for long."

The two Vaders were still fighting. It was as if a storm had erupted inside the room. Both were using the dark side to hurl empty cargo containers, pieces of equipment, even parts of the ship, at one another. The force of their battle would soon bring the building down. The fight wouldn't last much longer.

Tash remembered the two clones of herself that she'd met. Both had known everything she had known. But they were still different from her. One had been angry, almost evil. The other had appeared frightened and defeated. The real Tash had been bothered by the sense of the dark side, but the first clone must have been totally absorbed by it. Later, Tash had been frightened by the army of clones, but the second clone had been petrified.

So they weren't *exactly* like her. They couldn't have the same feelings. They hadn't had the same experiences, just memories of those experiences. The feelings attached to them were absent.

"There's no way to tell you apart," she said, raising the blaster. "I'll just have to shoot you both."

"What?" one of the Hooles shouted. "No!"

That Hoole lunged forward, and Tash fired. On Vader's orders, the troopers had set their blasters on stun, and the stunbolt slammed into that Hoole, dropping him to the ground.

The other Hoole raised an eyebrow.

Tash grinned. "Uncle Hoole?"

"Of course," he said. He bent down and picked up the remote activator still clutched in the other Hoole's hands. Zak was impressed. "How did you know?"

Tash shrugged. "Clones don't really understand feelings that well. The real Hoole would have known I couldn't shoot him, but the clone wouldn't know that. I knew he would believe my threat, and try to stop me."

Thrummm!

Behind them, a lightsaber had activated. Tash turned in time to see the two Vaders locked together, their hands grappling with

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the hilt of a single lightsaber. Muscles strained. Vibrations of the Force swirled around them like wind in a thunderstorm. Suddenly, one of the Vaders twisted, throwing the other off his feet. The standing Vader raised the lightsaber and stalked forward.

"Let's get out of here," Tash said.

They left the room just as the triumphant Darth Vader brought his saber crashing down.

Epilogue

In the darkness, Tash, Zak, and Hoole lay hidden in the grass. Night had fallen over Dantooine, and stars filled the sky. A low whine filled the air as the *Shroud*, responding to Hoole's remote activator, approached. It was moving slowly, and keeping low to the ground to avoid Imperial scanners. They were far from the Rebel base by now, but they could still see bright lights shining there. Vader's troops had set up huge glowpanels to light their investigation.

"Will they find us?" Zak asked.

"I do not think so," Hoole replied. "Whatever Vader came here for, I do not think he was expecting a battle, or a search. Besides, with all the Dantari and the clones running around the area, the Imperials would have a lot of ground to cover, just to find the three of us."

Maga had freed the rest of his tribe. Generations of tradition had told him to avoid the ruins, but Maga could not abandon his people. Like a true leader, he had faced his fear, helping Tash and the others in the process.

As Zak, Tash, and Hoole fled the Rebel base, they'd seen the Dantari hurrying across the bridge and out onto the prairie. A few of the clones had tried to stop them, but without the guidance of their leader, they were powerless.

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"Where'd the cloning technology come from?" Zak asked.

"It was here all the time, hidden beneath the ruins,"

Tash explained. She told them the story Maga had told her, about offworlders with power who had visited the ruins.

Hoole considered. "There was a great deal of cloning activity in the past. Perhaps the Jedi were trying to bring it under control. When Dantooine was abandoned, the equipment was left behind."

Zak shook his head. "But cloning technology takes years. These clones were made at hyperspeed."

"It was the mindscan," Tash guessed. "Remember the weird feeling we all had the first time we entered the round room? We were being scanned. Later, I heard the droids in the lab saying that my mindscan had already been harvested. The scans must have allowed the clones to be grown quickly and programmed with instant memories."

"Except for the Rebel clones," Hoole added, "for which no scans were available."

"Okay, so now we know how the Vader clone made clones," Zak said. "He just scraped up skin samples, hair, anything he could find from the Rebel base, and from us. But how did the Vader clone get cloned in the first place?"

Hoole shrugged. "We'll never know."

The *Shroud* touched down and the hatch opened. "Let's get out of here," Tash said.

They hurried on board the ship.

Vader had traveled back and forth from the Rebel base to the Jedi ruins several times, piecing together the clues to this mystery. It was obvious to him that the ancient Jedi had done experiments with cloning, and that some of their machinery had been left behind.

He knew what Zak, Tash, and Hoole could not. He remembered his previous visit to the ruins, the defensive blasters, and his wounds. Some of his blood must have spilled in the round chamber. The genetic maintenance droids, reactivated by the activity in the room, had been attracted by the proximity of fresh DNA. They'd gathered up a blood sample and used it to create a Vader clone. This clone had then gone on to create others.

That mystery was easily solved. But the two human children and the Shi'ido puzzled Vader more. They were *unusual*, those three. They had a talent for getting in the way. Vader had met them once before, and they'd slipped through his fingers. Now they had escaped him a second time. He would make sure that did not happen again.

Vader stood on the bridge between the base and the ruins, watching his stormtroopers work. They were gathering up all the clones they could find. The Rebel clones, with their limited mental abilities, would be nearly useless. The clones of the children and the Shi'ido would be more interesting. They would be studied before they were destroyed.

The cloning equipment itself he planned to take aboard his ship. The mindscanners were obviously flawed, creating imperfect replicas. His own clone, with its false armor and lightsaber, was proof of that. The mindscanned clones seemed unable to distinguish between reality and mere image. But perhaps they could be improved.

He knew the Emperor would find it interesting.

Book Twelve
The Hunger

Prologue

The bounty hunter stalked the corridors of the Super Star Destroyer.

The walls of the enormous battleship gleamed. The floors had the shine of brand-new, recently polished durasteel. Starship officers and white-armored stormtroopers—the cream of the Imperial crop—hurried past. They walked with the arrogance of men who knew they were serving aboard the newest and largest of the Emperor's ships. This was the Super Star Destroyer *Executor*, flagship of the Imperial Fleet, and the command ship of the Emperor's most ruthless servant, Darth Vader.

The bounty hunter couldn't have cared less.

His face was hidden by a gray helmet. Otherwise, the Imperials would have seen the hard, disinterested expression on his face and the cold look of a killer in his eyes. He wasn't impressed by ships or uniforms. He only cared about one thing: the job.

A set of massive doors hissed open, and the bounty hunter stepped inside a large, dark chamber. If the bounty hunter had had any emotions left, he might have felt afraid. But he'd left his feelings behind in bits and pieces, scattered among the bodies of countless victims on hundreds of worlds. So he didn't feel anything.

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A figure stepped out of the shadows. Tall. Covered in black armor. Face hidden behind a skull-like mask. Breath rasping like a death rattle.

Darth Vader.

The Dark Lord of the Sith acknowledged the bounty hunter's presence with a nod. "Boba Fett."

"Lord Vader," the bounty hunter replied. Then he waited. He knew Vader would get right to the point.

"I have an assignment for you," the Dark Lord said. "I have just put a large bounty on the heads of three individuals. Two human children and a male Shi'ido."

The bounty hunter's helmet dipped forward slightly. "I've never hunted a Shi'ido before. But human children—that doesn't sound interesting. Or profitable."

"Fifty thousand credits for each of the two children. Alive. One hundred thousand for the Shi'ido. Alive. Seventy-five thousand dead."

Boba Fett paused. "Then it's profitable. But still not interesting."

Vader held up one gloved hand. "These three have eluded capture several times. There is more to them than meets the eye."

The bounty hunter said, "I have another job. I'm hunting for a killer named Malloc. It pays more. A lot more."

Vader closed one gloved hand into a fist. "Consider this job a diversion until you find him." It was more of an order than a suggestion.

Boba Fett weighed his options. He didn't want the job. He didn't need the credits. But even *he* did not ignore the wishes of Darth Vader. Finally, the bounty hunter said, "Done."

Vader handed him a datadisk. Without another word, Boba Fett turned to leave. The moment he did, he forgot about his reluctance. He forgot that Vader had just threatened him into accepting the task. He forgot about everything but the job.

He wouldn't stop until he'd finished it.

Chapter One

"Don't move, or I'll shoot the boy," said the greasy-haired human, pointing his blaster at Zak.

Zak Arranda's eyes widened, but the blaster-wielding human wasn't looking at him. The killer had his eyes fixed on Zak's uncle Hoole. He didn't bother to look at Zak or at Zak's sister, Tash, who stood next to him.

They stood in a dark alley in the grimy spaceport of Nar Shaddaa. The man, grinning at them through a mouthful of broken teeth, had practically melted out of the shadows the moment they turned off the main street and into the alley.

"What is the meaning of this?" Hoole demanded in a calm, cool voice. "You have no right to threaten us."

"*This* gives me all the right I need," the man said, brandishing his weapon. "That and my bounty hunter's license. And you three have a price on your head I couldn't resist."

"A *bounty hunter*?" Tash said, surprised.

Beside her, Zak was stunned. He knew that he and his sister and their uncle Hoole were wanted by the Empire. They'd been on the run for months, ever since they'd stumbled upon a horrifying Imperial science experiment and helped to destroy it. He knew the Empire wanted to arrest them. But he'd had no idea

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the Imperials wanted them badly enough to put a price on their heads.

That meant not only that they were wanted by every Imperial agent in the galaxy but also that there could be dozens, maybe even hundreds, of bounty hunters tracking them as well. Any bounty hunter who captured them and turned them over to the Empire would receive a fortune in credits.

Zak saw Hoole pretend to be confused. "I do not know what you are talking about. You must be mistaken."

"I don't think so," the bounty hunter laughed. He recited facts as though reading off a datapad. "Two human children. A girl named Tash Arranda, blond, about thirteen standard years. Her brother, a boy named Zak Arranda, about twelve, dark hair. Traveling in the company of a Shi'ido."

The bounty hunter continued to glare at Hoole as he said, "Never seen a Shi'ido before. You look almost human, except for that gray skin." The killer snarled. "But I done my homework. I know you Shi'idos can change shape. So you twitch one muscle and I'll use the boy's head for target practice."

Zak looked at Uncle Hoole's face. What the bounty hunter said was true——Hoole could change shape. But even Hoole wasn't fast enough to stop the killer from firing his blaster. Zak saw a look of frustration pass across his uncle's face.

Looks like we came to the wrong place, Zak thought. Again.

Nar Shaddaa was a spaceport moon orbiting the planet Nal Hutta. Buildings rose dozens of kilometers into the sky and were connected by bridges, decks, and balconies that crisscrossed like streets suspended in midair. The walkways of Nar Shaddaa were filled with grime, graffiti, and shady-looking characters. Most of them looked tough enough to scare the wrappings off a Tusken Raider.

Zak, Tash, and Uncle Hoole had flown to Nar Shaddaa in their ship, the Shroud, several days earlier. They needed to resupply the ship, and while Nar Shaddaa wasn't the most wholesome place in the galaxy, it suited their needs. Nar Shaddaa

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was known for its smugglers, gangsters, and bounty hunters. The spaceport was dangerous, and although the Empire had a garrison here, the local Imperials did little to keep the streets safe.

Which was exactly why Hoole and the Arrandas had come.

Since the Imperials never bothered to patrol the streets of Nar Shaddaa, it was a safe enough stop for two humans and a Shi'ido wanted by the Empire.

Or so they'd thought.

As though he were reading Zak's thoughts, the bounty hunter said, "I bet you figured you'd be safe from the Empire here on Nar Shaddaa. Figured maybe the Imperials wouldn't look around this black hole of a spaceport. Well, you were wrong. There are plenty of bounty hunters that'd love to turn you in. Lucky for me, I spotted you first."

"Whatever the bounty is," Hoole said, "we will pay you double if you let us go."

The bounty hunter laughed. "You ain't got those kinds of credits. Besides, word in the space lanes is that some of the biggest bounty hunters in the galaxy are after you three. Hauling you in before any of them could send my reputation into lightspeed."

As the bounty hunter and Hoole spoke, Zak noticed how quiet Tash was. She'd hardly said a word, and she hadn't moved a muscle since the bounty hunter appeared. Glancing at her out of the corner of his eye, Zak saw that his sister had focused her gaze on the bounty hunter's blaster. A calm look had fallen across her face. For an instant—a fraction of a second—Zak felt something like a warm breeze pass through him. He knew what she was doing.

Tash was calling on the Force.

"Please put the blaster down," Hoole said. "I don't want the children to get hurt. I promise I won't cause you any problems."

"Oh, I *know* you won't," the bounty hunter said with another jagged-toothed smile. "You're worth almost as much dead as alive. And since I get the feeling you'd jump me first chance you

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got, I figure I'll just shoot you now and save myself a load of trouble."

With a snap of the wrist, the bounty hunter turned the blaster from Zak to Hoole. Zak felt the warm breeze turn into a blasting wind.

Just as the bounty hunter pulled the trigger, the arm holding the blaster jerked upward, and the blaster bolt sizzled over Hoole's shoulder.

Before Zak could move a muscle, the Shi'ido had shape-shifted into the bulky, snout-nosed form of a Gamorrean and pummeled the bounty hunter into unconsciousness with a few powerful blows. By the time Zak had taken two steps, Hoole had shifted back into his own shape and was tucking the bounty hunter's blaster into the folds of his robe.

"Tash," the Shi'ido said calmly, "I assume you caused that shot to miss?"

Tash nodded. "Yes. I'm starting to get the hang of the Force, I think. I still can't do much, but . . ."

Hoole nodded. "Your power is becoming most impressive."

Tash shrugged. "You did the real work."

Zak frowned, suddenly aware that he hadn't done anything to help.

"We must get back to the Shroud," Hoole said. "Nar Shaddaa is obviously not going to be as safe as we had hoped. In fact, if that bounty hunter is telling the truth, then Nar Shaddaa is one of the most dangerous places in the galaxy for us to be."

"But every place is dangerous," Zak said wearily. "Everywhere we've gone, the Empire has found us."

It felt to him as though they'd been on the run forever. In fact, they'd only been with Uncle Hoole for a little over a year. Almost twelve standard months ago, the Empire had destroyed Tash and Zak's home planet of Alderaan, killing their mother and father and all their friends in one terrible blow. Zak and Tash had survived only because they'd been offplanet at the time. Hoole, their uncle by marriage, was their only living relative. So they'd

gone to live with him. And they'd hardly had a moment to catch their breath since.

"There's got to be someplace safe we can go," Tash said.

"No place I've ever heard of," Zak grumbled. Hoole raised an eyebrow. "An interesting idea."

"What do you mean?" asked Zak.

"A place that no one has ever heard of," the Shi'do said thoughtfully. "We should find a planet that has not been charted. That would be safe from the Empire."

Zak shook his head. "But if it's a planet no one's ever charted, how are *we* going to find it?"

Hoole led them out of the alley. "There is a way. As you both know, my anthropology work has taken me to many different planets. Whenever an exploration party has discovered a new planet, they send data to our research facility on the planet Koaan. Sometimes, it takes months for this data to be studied. And since the Empire took over . . ."

Zak snorted. "I'll bet since the Empire took over, things have slowed down even more."

"Precisely," Hoole said. "The data banks at the research facility are filled with planets that have been located but never studied or colonized."

Tash's eyes lit up. "You're saying we could use the information stored on Koaan to find a planet that no one else has bothered to study, a planet that hasn't made it onto the official charts."

"Precisely," Hoole said again. "We shall go to Koaan."

They had been lucky to escape the first bounty hunter, and their luck held out as they hurried through the streets of Nar Shaddaa. If they did pass any other bounty hunters, the killers didn't recognize them. The three fugitives reached the Shroud with no trouble.

A few minutes later they received clearance to depart, and the starship roared out of the atmosphere and into space.

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"Once we reach Koaan," Hoole said when they were all seated in the ship's cockpit, "we must find Deevee. I am sure he will be able to help us."

"Deevee!" Tash said with a laugh. "We haven't seen that droid in ages!"

D-V9, or Deevee for short, had been Hoole's servant droid, and had accompanied Hoole and the Arrandas on several of their adventures. However, after being severely damaged by stormtroopers on the planet Kiva, he had retired to a quieter life as a research assistant on Koaan.

"Deevee is still doing work at the Galactic Research Academy," Hoole said. "I am sure he will have access to the—"

An alarm bleeped softly on the control board. Hoole studied the scanners and frowned.

"What is it?" Zak asked.

"There is a ship behind us," Hoole said. "It left Nar Shaddaa just as we did, and it seems to be following us."

"An Imperial ship?" Tash asked tensely.

Zak looked at the scanner, which gave a general outline of the ship behind them. "Doesn't look like it. It's too small. And——this is weird——according to the scanners, there are no life-forms aboard."

"Then how can it be following us?" Tash wondered.

"I do not know," the Shi'ido said. "However, it makes little difference. We are ready to make the jump to hyperspace. No one will be able to follow us then."

With a few quick motions, Hoole entered the proper commands, and the Shroud lurched forward. The stars turned into white streaks as the ship thundered into hyperspace.

"There," Hoole said, getting out of the pilot's seat. "We are safe. The coordinates are set and Koaan is not far from here. Let's go to the lounge and get something to eat."

Zak and Tash followed their uncle into the central room of the Shroud. It was a small common room with several seats

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where they ate their meals and where Tash and Zak played hologames.

As they entered the room, the door to a small storage closet slid open and an armored figure stepped out. Tash, Zak, and Hoole recognized him instantly. They'd met him before.

It was Boba Fett.

Chapter Two

The bounty hunter moved smoothly and efficiently, with incredible speed. Before they could blink, a thick cable lashed out from a device on Fett's wrist and wrapped itself around Hoole, pinning his arms to his sides.

In the same motion, Fett brought his other hand up. A flash of light blinded Zak and Tash, and Zak felt his arms and legs go limp. As he hit the floor, Zak thought he was dying. Then he realized that he could still see—he just couldn't move.

Boba Fett had hit him with some kind of stun bolt.

The bolt must have missed Tash, because she was still on her feet. She jumped behind a lounge chair as Fett fired again. The stun bolt sputtered against the seat and vanished.

By that time Hoole had recovered from his initial shock. The Shi'ido started to quiver, and shape-shifted into a creature that looked like a serpent with a collar of bright feathers. The serpent slithered away, and Fett's capture cable fell limply to the floor. Fett swung his blaster around to shoot Hoole, but the feathered serpent had slipped down the corridor that led to the sleeping cabins.

Fett took one step down the corridor, and something small and hard ricocheted off the back of his helmet. Fett whirled and fired as the small object was still bouncing away in midair.

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A drinking cup, struck by Fett's blaster bolt, shattered into a thousand pieces.

Another drinking cup leaped off a shelf and flew toward the bounty hunter. This time, Fett simply swatted it aside with the back of his hand.

Tash was using the Force again. Zak knew she couldn't do much against a killer like Boba Fett. She wasn't strong enough in the Force to throw anything really heavy at him. But at least she was doing *something*. He, on the other hand, felt totally useless.

Fett's helmeted head swiveled from the corridor where Hoole had disappeared, to the chair that Tash was hiding behind. The bounty hunter was trying to decide which prey to capture first. He never bothered to look at Zak, who had already been taken out of action.

Finally, Fett spoke. "Surrender now and I won't kill you," his hard, cold voice rasped. "You're worth more to me alive. Fight, and you'll die."

"Leave us alone!" Tash yelled from behind her chair.

Fett ignored her. "Surrender. You are unarmed."

As if to prove him wrong, a blaster bolt sizzled out of the hallway and glanced off the bounty hunter's armored shoulder. The force of the blow spun Fett around, and immediately the bounty hunter dove for cover. He pressed himself against one wall, out of sight of the corridor.

"Armed," Fett muttered to himself. "Not in the profile."

Zak would have smiled if his muscles hadn't been frozen by the stun bolt. Hoole was using the blaster he'd taken from the other bounty hunter.

"Last chance," Fett shouted down the corridor. "Surrender or die."

"Leave the ship!" Hoole ordered back from his hiding place.

"You've made your choice," Fett replied.

Still holding his blaster in one hand, the killer pointed his other arm down the hallway. There was a wrist rocket attached to

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his glove. The rocket flared and then shrieked as it hurtled down the corridor.

"Uncle Hoole!" Tash shouted.

The small rocket hit the back of the ship and exploded. Flames and smoke blasted down the corridor and continued to pour out of the hallway. Cautiously, the bounty hunter started down the blasted hall.

Zak's arms and legs tingled as feeling began to return to them.

"Zak," Tash whispered, appearing beside him. "Are you okay?"

"Shhtunnd," he slurred out of his half-frozen mouth. Tash helped him sit up.

"Where did he come from?" Tash whispered.

"He must have spotted us on Nar Shaddaa and sneaked on board the ship," Zak guessed. "I'll bet a Hutt's treasure that's his ship following us, on autopilot."

"What do we do now?" Tash asked. They both stared down the hallway.

Zak felt his jaw start to work better as the stun bolt's effects wore off. "Escape pod. We've got to get off the ship."

"But where will we go?" Tash whispered back. "We're in the middle of hyperspace!"

Tash had barely spoken when the ship lurched and slowed. The soft hum of the hyperdrive engines died, replaced by the sudden churning of the sublight drive. The Shroud had dropped out of hyperspace.

Tash and Zak heard someone shout from the back of the Shroud, and another explosion rocked the ship. A cloud of smoke rolled toward them from the engine room—and something rushed toward them out of the cloud.

It was Uncle Hoole.

The shoulder of his robe had been torn away and blood trickled down his sleeve.

"Uncle Hoole, you're hurt!" Tash cried.

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"We have to get off this ship before Boba Fett kills us all," the Shi'ido said grimly.

"The escape pod!" Zak said.

"Yes," Hoole agreed. "We just left hyperspace. We should be over the planet Koaan."

A blaster bolt ripped through the wall above their heads. "Come!" Hoole ordered.

Together, they staggered toward the escape pod and jumped inside. Zak strapped himself into a seat, sparing a quick glance out into the hall.

Boba Fett was stalking toward them, blaster in hand.

Hoole slapped the controls, closing the emergency blast doors just as the bounty hunter fired. They heard the energy bolt slam into the heavy crash door. The Shi'ido glanced around to make sure Zak and Tash had both safely strapped themselves into their crash webbing; then he pulled a large red handle. Safety bolts exploded, and the escape pod hurled itself away from the ship.

"Look at the damage," Zak whispered, staring at the Shroud through a viewport.

Smoke and flames poured out of the ship's engines.

"Yes," Hook explained. "I tried to trap Boba Fett in the engine rooms, but he was too careful to be tricked. He fired his wrist rocket into the engines to flush me out. If I had not shapeshifted into a fire-resistant Gregonian salamander, I would have been killed."

Tash checked the escape pod's small control panel. "According to these readings, we're dropping into Koaan's gravity field. We should be able to land with no trouble. Will we find help there?"

"I do not know," Hoole replied. "But I will try to land us as close to the research center as possible."

"And as far away from Fett as we can get," Tash added.

"I wouldn't worry about him," Zak said. "It looks like the Shroud is headed for an explosion or a crash landing. Maybe it'll take Fett with it."

The escape pod wasn't designed for long flights. It was programmed to find the closest planet and land there as softly as possible—which proved to be not very softly at all.

Koaan's gravity grabbed hold of them, pulling the small pod faster and faster toward the surface. Entering the planet's atmosphere, the pod began to heat up until the outside flamed like a meteor. The inside grew hotter, too. Hoole fired the landing rockets, trying to slow their descent, and the pod rattled and bumped through the air. Just when Zak thought he couldn't take the heat or the rattling any longer, the pod hit the ground with an enormous *thud!* that jolted him from his feet to the top of his head.

They had landed on Koaan.

Hoole opened the hatch and all three of them crawled from the smoking escape pod onto sandy ground. They had landed on the edge of a lake. Zak got the impression of green hills in the distance, warm sun, and a brilliant blue sky. But like Hoole and Tash, he was exhausted and quickly collapsed facedown on the ground. He closed his eyes with a sigh.

The sound of a footstep made him look up.

Lying there, he could see a long shadow creeping along the ground. It was the shadow of a being covered in hard, smooth armor.

The shadow fell across him.

Chapter Three

"Look out!" Zak shouted, scrambling away from the helmeted figure. He expected to feel another of Boba Fettes stun bolts.

Instead, a mechanical-sounding voice spoke: "There is no need to panic, Zak."

Zak blinked. The figure standing before him wasn't Boba Fett. In fact, it wasn't a living creature at all. It was a droid. "Deevee!" Zak shouted.

The silver droid took another step forward. He was built to look as much like a human as possible, but the movements of his mechanical arms and legs were stiff and jerky.

"Deevee!" Tash shouted after Zak. She threw her arms around the droid.

"It's good to see you both again," Deevee said to the two Arrandas; then he turned to their uncle. "And Master Hoole. Welcome back to Koaan."

Hoole, who rarely smiled, almost grinned to see his old companion. "Thank you, D-V9. I am glad you received my transmission."

"Indeed," the droid said. "Although I expected you to arrive by ship, not by lifepod."

"So did we," Zak said. "But Boba Fett had other plans."

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"Boba Fett!" squawked the droid. Deevee had been with them on their first encounter with the bounty hunter months earlier. "What does that killer want?"

"Us," Tash answered. "The Empire has put a price on our heads."

"Which brings us to our visit," Hoole added. "Deevee, do you have access to the research center's unprocessed data files?"

Deevee nodded. "Of course, Master Hoole. I'm now the assistant to the chief anthropologist. I have access to the entire facility."

"Good," Hoole said. "Because here is what we need . . ."

On the way to the research facility, Hoole——interrupted often by Zak and Tash——told Deevee everything that had happened to them over the last few months. After they had helped the Rebel Alliance destroy a terrible scientific experiment created for the Empire, Zak, Tash, and Hoole had searched for a safe place to hide. But trouble and terror seemed drawn to them the way light was drawn down a black hole in space.

"It sounds terrible," Deevee said as they came near the research center. "Your situation has become worse since we last parted company."

"That's why we need a really safe place to hide," Tash said. "Not just a distant planet. We need a planet no one has ever heard of."

"I'm sure you'll find it in the old catalogs," Deevee said. "That information isn't classified, so no one will question your presence as long as you are with me. However, Master Hoole, your face is very well known here from your days as an anthropologist. You will surely be recognized."

"That is not a problem," the Shi'ido replied. He closed his eyes. His gray skin seemed to wriggle across his bones for a moment——and then Hoole was gone, replaced by a very average——looking human with brown hair and brown eyes.

"Excellent," Deevee said. "I wouldn't want anyone to recognize you with all the stormtroopers about."

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"Stormtroopers!" Hoole said through his new shape. "There have never been stormtroopers on Koaan."

"There are now," the droid said with a hint of sadness in his mechanical voice. "Ever since the Rebellion, the Empire has sent military forces to control every scientific facility it owns, no matter how small. But they shouldn't trouble us."

Deevee was right. The Galactic Research Academy was a place of learning and a storehouse of information gathered by scientists and scholars from across the galaxy. Because it contained no military secrets and stayed out of politics, it wasn't considered very important by the Empire or the Rebellion. As long as the Academy didn't break any Imperial rules, it didn't get much attention. The few Imperials on the planet were there to make sure no one spread any information that would show the Empire in a bad light.

Although Hoole's familiar face might have caused a stir, the sight of a droid escorting one human adult and two human children made no impression at all.

Deevee led them through a courtyard where a few scholars, mostly human, hurried here and there on Academy business. They then followed Deevee into a large building several stories tall.

"All the floors above us contain the main library," the droid explained as they reached a bank of turbolifts. "It's one of the most complete records of galactic knowledge anywhere. But we are going down."

A turbolift arrived and they entered. The lift descended with a gentle hum. A moment later the door opened and they found themselves facing a sour-looking man in an Imperial uniform. His skin was pale and sickly from sitting in a dingy office belowground every day.

Zak tensed on seeing the Imperial uniform, but Deevee merely shuffled out of the turbolift, leaned forward, and spoke so that his voice would be picked up by a microphone on the Imperial's desk. "Greetings, Deputy Strey. D-V9 requesting

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access to raw data files. I have three researchers from offplanet with me."

The Imperial, Deputy Strey, glanced at a screen. "Voice authorization confirmed. Go ahead," the Imperial said.

Deputy Strey didn't even look at them again as they continued down a dimly lit hallway, past several unmarked doors. To Zak, all the doors looked alike. But Deevee knew where he was going. He opened one of the doors and stepped inside.

They were in a large room lined with rows of shelves. Each shelf was piled high with containers, and each container held hundreds of datadisks. In the corner was a computer terminal.

"This place is some thrill," Zak said sarcastically.

"It may look boring to you, Zak," said Hoole. "But every one of those disks contains the records of a team that discovered and explored an uncharted planet. Who knows what dangers they faced, or what treasures they discovered?"

"Well, no one knows," Deevee answered. "These records have been sitting here for years."

"Why?" Tash asked, staring wide-eyed at the galaxy of information around her. Tash was a reader, and the thought of all that knowledge made her head spin.

"Everything we record has to be approved by the Empire first," the droid explained. "All these disks are just copies. The originals are on Coruscant, the Imperial capital. Once a file is approved, we can send it upstairs to the main library. Luckily for us, with nothing else to do, the Academy scholars have been copying and cross-referencing the files into this computer. Thus, we don't need to search through the disks themselves."

Zak looked at the stacks of datadisks that reached the ceiling. "Good. There are enough disks here to smother a bantha."

As Deevee activated the computer terminal, Hoole, who had shifted back into his own shape, said, "Go back years, Deevee. Look for something that was discovered before the Empire took over."

"Why?" Tash asked her uncle.

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"If a planet was discovered under the Empire, it was probably discovered by Imperials. We do not want to go anywhere they have been. We want a place that was discovered a long time ago, and then forgotten."

"I think I've found just the planet," Deevee said, after a short search. "This planet was discovered by an exploration team almost forty years ago. It——"

The door hissed open behind them. Startled by the intrusion, they all whirled around to see Deputy Strey standing in the doorway. His pale face had gone even whiter. He looked like death itself.

Deputy Strey gagged, as if trying to speak. Then he fell face first into the room and did not move again.

Chapter Four

While Zak and the others were staring down at Strey, eight beings charged into the room, stepping over the Imperial's body. The first was a woman with long, thick hair, a blaster in her hand. Behind her came a Twi'lek with two thick tentacles growing out of the back of his head. They were wrapped around his shoulders like a scarf. Four men followed, all dressed in sloppy flight uniforms, all heavily armed.

The woman glared at Hoole, Zak, and Tash. Then she pointed her blaster at them. "Who are you?" she demanded.

Hoole returned her gaze calmly. "We could ask you the same question. What have you done to that man?"

The Twi'lek looked at the woman and said, "We don't have time for this, Platt."

The woman, Platt, looked at the motionless Imperial and answered Hoole's question. "He'll live. He's just stunned." Platt raised an eyebrow. "Two human kids, a Shi'ido, and a droid. I'm just making a guess here—you aren't the local stormtrooper patrol, are you?"

"We are not Imperials," Hoole admitted. "You can put away your blaster. We are simply here to gather some information; then we will be on our way."

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"Us too," Platt said. She holstered her blaster, and her companions put theirs away as well. "You, droid," she said to Deevee. "You work here?"

Deevee said, "I am a research assistant to the——"

"Good. This is what we need," Platt interrupted. "I've heard you've got billions of data bits of information on unregistered planets. We need one. Now."

Hoole raised an eyebrow. "Curious. We are here for a similar reason."

By this time Platt had already moved to the computer terminal. She scanned the information on the screen and muttered, "Yeah . . . yeah . . . this'll do fine. This is perfect."

"You can't have that planet," Zak said. "That one's ours!"

Platt laughed. "Look, no offense, kid, but we're in kind of a hurry. We think someone spotted us breaking into this place, and if we don't get out fast, we'll——"

"Freeze!" someone yelled.

Every eye in the room turned toward the door, where a white-armored stormtrooper stood, a blaster rifle in his hands.

Platt didn't freeze. She drew her blaster at lightspeed and fired from the hip. The bolt struck the trooper in the chest and sent him staggering backward.

"They got here faster than I expected," Platt muttered.

"What do we do, Platt?" the Twi'lek asked.

"Guard the door while I download the information," she replied. Platt's companions went to the door, blasters at the ready.

"I'm afraid you can't just barge in here like this," Deevee insisted. "There are regulations!"

Platt shook her head. "Something tells me you four aren't too concerned about regulations." She connected a small handheld datapad to the computer and downloaded the information on the planet Deevee had found.

"Stop that!" Zak insisted. "We don't want anyone to know about that planet!"

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"That makes two of us," Platt said. She finished downloading the information, then punched in a command on the computer. The information Deevee had found vanished, replaced by the words "File Deleted."

The sound of heavy blaster fire filled the hallway outside. They could hear more stormtroopers calling for them to surrender.

"Platt, we can't hold them off for long!" the Twi'lek shouted.

Platt looked at Deevee. "Is there another way out of here?"

Deevee pointed to a cargo door at the back of the room. "That leads to a freight turbolift used for heavy items. But I'm afraid I don't have the access code that——"

"No problem," Platt snapped. Out came her blaster again, and she poured energy bolts into the door until it burst into pieces. The turbolift was visible on the other side.

"Come on, Tru'eb!" the woman yelled to her Twi'lek friend. "We're taking the back door!"

"Wait," Hoole said firmly. "You will have to take us with you."

The woman paused. "Says who?"

Hoole met her gaze evenly. "You've just stolen information we went to great trouble to get, and you have attracted Imperial attention that we do not want. If you leave, the stormtroopers will throw us into a detention block."

Platt shrugged. "That's your problem."

"And it would be most unfortunate," Hoole continued, "if we were forced to tell the Imperials where you were going."

Platt scowled. She knew she was stuck. "Come on then. Just don't slow us down."

Zak, Tash, and Hoole started for the turbolift, then realized that Deevee hadn't moved. "Deevee," Zak asked, "aren't you coming?"

The droid shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Zak. My place is here now."

"But the stormtroopers will turn you into scrap!" Tash said.

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"Why should they? I work here. I've done nothing wrong."

"But——" Zak started to protest.

"Zak," the droid broke in, "I am not programmed for philosophy, but I've seen enough to know that you and Tash are in for more excitement than my circuitry can handle. I belong here."

"Very well, old friend," Hoole said. "Thank you for your help."

"Come on, or get left behind!" Platt shouted from the turbolift. Her companions were still at the door, firing their blasters down the now-smoking hallway. One by one, they backed away from the door and broke for the turbolift.

As the sound of blaster fire grew deafening, Hoole and the two Arrandas hurried into the lift with the last of the mysterious intruders. The turbolift rose out of sight just as the stormtroopers charged into the room.

A short time later, nothing remained in the basement computer room but a thin cloud of smoke from the earlier blaster fight, and the smell of metal burned by energy beams.

Boba Fett slipped quietly into the room.

He had already learned from the stormtroopers what had happened. He knew that a group of unknown intruders had broken into the Galactic Research Academy and accessed information from the computer. They had then slipped away from a squad of stormtroopers, reached a waiting ship, and blasted their way into space. That was all the stormtroopers knew.

Boba Fett knew more. He knew that his targets had been here, too, and that they had left with the mysterious intruders. He knew that the droid had helped them, but he didn't tell that to the authorities. Let them do their own dirty work.

All Fett cared about was the job.

The bounty hunter went to the computer terminal and removed a small device from his belt. The device had cost him thousands of credits, but it helped him do his job, so it was

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worth the price. Once it was attached to a computer, the device began to search the files for anything that had been erased. If used quickly enough, the device could recover data that had been deleted.

After a moment, the device beeped and began to collect information that had been erased.

Fett had found what he was looking for. He studied the data for a moment and nodded in satisfaction. Now he knew where they were going. They were headed for a swamp planet called Dagobah.

The hunt was on.

Chapter Five

Zak, Tash, and Hoole were on board Platt's starship, the Last Chance. Since the Imperial presence on Koaan was very small, they'd had no difficulty reaching her ship, and once they were in deep space, there was no way for the local authorities to follow them.

It wasn't long before a few questions and a few guesses gave Zak and Tash a pretty good idea of who their new acquaintance was.

Her name was Platt Okeefe and she was a smuggler. Zak always thought of smugglers as crude, unlikeable characters who worked for gangsters like Jabba the Hutt. But Platt seemed friendly enough. She laughed when she noticed Zak giving her a suspicious glance.

"You've got a problem with me, kid?" she asked.

Zak shrugged. "You're a smuggler. What am I supposed to think?"

Platt shrugged. "Think anything you want."

Zak frowned. "Do you ever work for the Empire?"

The smuggler laughed. "I might, if the price was right. But mostly I carry stuff the Empire says is illegal to people who want it anyway. So I guess you could say I work for the other side."

Zak's eyes brightened. "Do you ever work for the Rebellion?"

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"Sometimes. I don't mind doing a job for them now and then, when they can pay. I consider it a bonus to be able to stick it to the Imps."

"Imps?" he asked.

"Imperials," Platt said. "I don't really take sides, but if I had my way, all the Imps could jump into hyperspace and never jump back."

That was good enough for Zak.

Platt, the Twi'lek called Tru'eb, and the rest of their gang were trying to set up a new base of operations. Because of all the Imperial activity in every corner of space, not to mention competition from other smugglers, they wanted to find someplace unknown to the rest of the galaxy. Platt had heard of the information stored at the Research Academy and decided to make use of it.

Tash and Hoole had been reviewing information about Dagobah. They found Zak and Platt and brought them up to date on what they had learned.

"Dagobah is covered by swamps," Tash said. "The research team that went to study it never returned. We found only a few of their recorded entries. It looks like they started having trouble after a couple of months on the planet. They sent out a distress signal, but no one answered it, at least not by the time they made their last entry.

"It appears that the automatic distress signal was picked up years later by a passing freighter," Hoole said. "They recovered the team's research logs, but found no survivors."

Zak's jaw dropped. "And *this* is where we're going? It sounds dangerous."

Platt yawned. "Relax, kid. Those science teams are usually a bunch of pinheads who spend all their time looking at bugs and not watching where they're going. Besides, I want someplace no one else wants to go."

"So do we," said Tash.

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"Yeah, well, I've been meaning to ask you," the smuggler said. "Why are you looking for a deserted planet? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Hoole answered her question. "We need to avoid the Imperials. Let's leave it at that."

"So you're on the run," Platt said. "You're welcome to come with us to Dagobah for now. Once we've laid low for a while and checked the place out, we can think about what to do next."

Zak knew Hoole would accept Platt's terms. What choice did they have? They didn't have a ship of their own anymore.

"Very well," Hoole said.

The trip to Dagobah took less than a standard day. The planet was fairly close to normal space routes—it was just that no one ever bothered to stop there.

The Last Chance dropped out of hyperspace, and Platt made one orbit around the planet, scanning it with the ship's sensors. "I'm getting major life-form readings," she said. "There's something alive down there."

"A lot of somethings," Zak said. Platt had allowed her passengers to sit in the cockpit during the landing. Zak stared through the viewscreen at the glowing green ball that was Dagobah.

Tash, who had been studying the planet intently, suddenly whispered, "There's something weird there."

"What was that, Tash?" Hoole asked.

Tash blinked as though coming out of a trance. "I... I don't know. I just got a feeling."

"Perhaps we should reconsider landing here," Hoole said to Platt.

The smuggler laughed. "What, because your niece has a case of nerves? Happens to kids during space travel sometimes. Forget it."

"We have learned to trust Tash's feelings," Hoole explained. "They have saved our lives several times."

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"Is it a bad feeling, 'Tash?" Zak asked, wishing he had her intuition. She always seemed to know what was going to happen before it did.

Tash shrugged. "No, not a bad feeling. A good feeling. Well, no, not exactly good either . . ."

"Well, no matter what you're feeling, we're landing now, so strap yourselves in," Platt said.

The ride down into Dagobah's atmosphere rattled their bones. The ship's frame groaned and squealed. Platt and Tru'eb had to scramble to keep from crash-landing. As it was, their ship hit the ground a little too fast and plunged into the swampy surface of Dagobah.

"Everyone all right?" Platt called out.

"I feel like all my teeth got knocked loose," Zak said.

Platt grinned. "First rule of piloting: If your passengers can answer the question, then the landing was good. Let's see the sights."

She popped out of her crashwebbing and hurried to the hatch. Tru'eb and the rest of the smugglers followed. Zak, Tash, and Hoole brought up the rear of the small party.

The moment Platt opened the hatch, a thick odor flooded into the ship from outside.

"Ugh!" Zak almost gagged. "It smells like rotting leaves."

"Rotting something, anyway," Platt said, wrinkling her nose. "Come on, let's go."

Zak, Tash, Uncle Hoole, and the smugglers stepped out onto the world called Dagobah.

The atmosphere was dark and wet. The ground was covered with pools of water, sometimes ankle-deep, sometimes much deeper. Even the higher ground was muddy and squished under their boots. Gigantic gnarled trees rose up all around them, reaching into a dark roof of branches and leaves so thick they blocked out the sun.

"They're called gnarltrees," Tash said, pointing to the trees. "That's what the records say."

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Zak grimaced, irritated that, as usual, Tash knew more than he did. "Whatever they're called, they sure make it dark down here."

"We've got glowrods," Platt said. She pulled a short tube from a pack on her shoulder and activated it. The other smugglers lit more glowrods, casting a circle of pale yellow light around them.

Mist drifted through the trees. Unseen creatures skittered across branches or splashed in puddles. They could hear distant shrieks and calls, whistles, and long, spooky moans. Zak heard something flap its wings over his head, but by the time he looked up, it was gone.

"I see something through those trees," Hoole said, pointing. "A small structure of some sort."

"Good," Platt responded. "I landed as close to the explorers' camp as I could."

The group trudged through knee-deep water until they reached what had once been the explorers' camp. Zak was impressed with Platt's piloting skills—she'd landed within fifty meters of her target.

The camp was a collection of one-story buildings barely tall enough to stand in. Most of them had been overturned, and years of rain and floods had sunk them into the dismal swamp.

"Just as I thought," Platt said. "They set up flimsy shelters, and I bet they didn't even use energy shields to protect the camp. They were more interested in studying the planet than staying safe."

"They were scientists," Hoole said. "They were very brave."

"And stupid," Platt said. "Bravery doesn't count if you're dead."

"Look at this," Tash called out. She had crossed to the other side of the camp. "I think I found some kind of path."

The smugglers carried glowrods over to Tash for a better view. In the pale light, they could see a line of moss-covered stones leading away from the old camp.

They were stepping-stones.

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Platt studied the stones for a moment. "The explorers must have built this path when they landed here."

Hoole wasn't convinced. "That seems unlikely. The camp structures have all collapsed or been swallowed by the swamp. If this path were forty years old, it wouldn't have survived."

"Then that means someone has been here more recently," Zak pointed out.

Platt drew her blaster. "If that's true, this will be a lousy secret base. Let's have a look."

Boldly, she jumped out to the first stepping-stone. It sank a little under her weight, but held. Tru'eb went next, with Hoole and the Arrandas behind. The others brought up the rear.

The stepping-stones led straight through a dark, fetid swamp. As they walked, Tash pointed out various plants and small animals she had read about in the records.

Why does she always seem to know everything? Zak said to himself.

He thought back to Nar Shaddaa, when Tash had helped Hoole defeat the bounty hunter while he had done nothing. And then, later, when he had been stunned by Boba Fett, Tash had tried to fight the killer off.

Now she was flaunting how smart she was.

It wasn't fair. *He* didn't have the Force. How could he hope to match his sister?

Now and then a stone was missing and they each had to make a long jump to the next step. At one particularly long gap, Platt had to shift herself to the back edge of her stepping-stone and use a running start to reach the next one. Tru'eb made the jump, and Hoole hopped across easily on his long legs. Tash gathered herself and leaped. Her feet just reached the edge of the next stepping-stone. She slipped on the mossy surface, but Hoole grabbed her and pulled her up.

"Can you make it, Zak?" the Shi'ido asked.

If Tash can make it, I can make it, he thought. "Sure!" he said aloud.

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Zak backed up to the edge of his stepping-stone, took two small steps, and launched himself into the air.

The instant his feet left the ground he knew he wasn't going to make it.

He came down a half meter short, falling chest-deep into the cold, murky swamp water. He felt his feet stick in the ooze at the bottom. But he didn't care about the cold or the slimy water. His cheeks flushed red with embarrassment as the others started to laugh.

But the next moment, all the color drained from Zak's face.

Two figures were rising up out of the water beside him. Zak saw two human heads covered with stringy hair, two sets of pale eyes, two gaping mouths missing several teeth, and two sets of bony arms. The skin hanging from those arms looked old and dead.

They were corpses. Human corpses.

And they were reaching out to grab him.

Chapter Six

Shouting in fright, Zak tried to scramble up onto the stepping-stone, but he slipped on the moss.

He felt a cold, wet hand close around his arm.

Before he could cry out again, Platt was kneeling beside him. She jabbed her blaster over Zak's shoulder and fired. The corpse screamed and let go, falling into the water with a splash.

As friendly hands pulled Zak up to safety, Platt swiveled her blaster to fire at the other corpse. But this one threw its hands up in front of its face and wailed, "No, please!"

Platt's finger eased off the trigger. The corpse continued to back away through the waist-deep water. Its pale, frightened eyes looked from the newcomers to the body of its companion, now floating on the surface, and back again. "Don't hurt me."

"Why not?" Platt said in a hard voice. "You were going to hurt one of us."

"Wait," Hoole said firmly, putting one hand on top of the smuggler's weapon.

From the safety of the raised stepping-stone, Zak took a second look at his attacker. It obviously wasn't a corpse—it was a young human male. But his skin was so pale that Zak was sure the man had never spent any time in the sun. And he was

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incredibly thin, like a living skeleton. His sunken cheeks and eyes gave his head the look of a skull.

"Why did you attack us?" Hoole asked.

The pale man shook his head, his stringy hair flopping around his neck and face. "Did not attack. Tried to help. Boy fell into water. Tried to help."

"That's not what it looked like from here," Platt muttered.

"Tried to help," the skeletal man insisted. He glanced again at his dead companion.

"Who are you?" Tash asked.

The man's eyes narrowed. "I live here. Who are *you*? You are not from Dagobah."

"No," Hoole answered before anyone else could. "We're here to explore this planet."

The skeleton's eyes lit up. "Explorers? The parents were explorers!"

"What in space does that mean?" Zak asked.

"Platt, let's help him up out of the water." Hoole gestured at the corpselike man. "He is undoubtedly freezing."

Reluctantly, the smuggler reached out a hand and hauled the soaked man up to one of the stepping-stones as the others moved farther down the path to make room. The pale man was dressed in slime-coated rags, and stood only a little taller than Zak and Tash.

"Now," Hoole asked, his dark eyes staring into the man, "if you were not attacking us, why were you hiding under the water?"

"We were hunting," The pale man said. "We saw you come down the steps. Didn't know what you were. Came for a closer look, when that one fell in the water. Tried to help."

The story sounded suspicious to Zak, and he could see doubt in everyone else's eyes, too. But this stranger was no danger to them at the moment.

"We thought Dagobah was uninhabited," the Shi'ido said. "What is your name? And who are these parents you speak of?"

John Whitman

"I am Galt," the skeleton man explained. "The parents were . . . the parents were the parents of the Children. Us. They were the explorers. We are the Children."

"You mean the explorers who came to Dagobah forty years ago?" Tash asked.

Galt nodded. "That is when the explorers came here."

"How many of you are there?" Hoole asked.

"This many," Galt said. He held his hand up to show five fingers. He did that five times.

"Twenty-five people?" Platt groaned. "So much for our uninhabited planet."

"How can that be?" Tash asked. "According to the records, there weren't that many people on the original expedition."

"The records are incomplete," Hoole pointed out. "Maybe they are flawed. At any rate, Galt is proof that someone survived here long enough to have children. Galt, where are your friends? Can you take us to them?"

Galt agreed to lead them to his home, but he insisted on bringing the body of his companion with them. Some of Platt's smugglers helped him lift the body out of the swamp, and Galt hefted the corpse over one shoulder.

Despite his frail appearance, Galt seemed quite strong. Even with the added weight of the body, he jumped easily from stone to stone, and soon they were hurrying along the path.

"We should go fast," Galt said. "There's a dragonsnake nest around here. We don't want to be here when she gets hungry."

Zak was glad of the path, and not just because it kept his feet out of the slimy water. The swamp seemed to go on forever, and it was impossible to tell one part from another. The massive trees, the moss-covered mud, and the endless pools of water all looked alike. Without the path, they would have gotten lost in minutes. And Zak had a feeling that getting lost in this swamp was not a good idea.

Goooooooooooooooooooo.

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A deep growl, long, low, and menacing, rose from the swamp water. Instantly, Galt dropped to his hands and knees, cowering on the stepping-stone where he'd stopped. He froze so quickly that Platt stumbled over him and almost fell. To keep her balance, she hopped to the next steppingstone in the line.

"What in space are you doing?" she demanded, turning back. "You nearly made me fall right into that——"

Another deep growl cut her off. Suddenly, the stone on which she stood started to rise. The water beneath it churned, and Zak realized that something was rising up from *under* the water, lifting the stone as it came. Platt shouted in alarm and jumped from the stone, falling into the murky swamp.

The creature that rose out of the water was enormous. Its head towered at least five meters above them, and Zak saw that most of its body was still hidden beneath the water. Its skin was sickly white and its huge eyes glowed yellow. Two thick antennae grew out of its head, quivering as the creature swayed back and forth. A gigantic mouth opened and shut slowly, as though tasting the air.

"Swamp slug!" Galt shrieked, not moving.

"Shoot it!" Platt sputtered from the water. "Shoot it!"

Her smugglers opened fire. Several shots went wild as the shooters panicked. But even the blaster bolts that hit their mark seemed to do nothing but vanish in the giant slug's slimy flesh. It gurgled and lurched toward its attackers, pushing itself through the water alongside the stone path. Terrified, the smugglers dove into the water.

Zak saw Hoole start to shape-change, but he was too slow. The swamp slug lunged at him, its mouth open, and the Shi'ido had to jump aside to avoid being swallowed.

Only Zak and Tash were left teetering on the steppingstones. "Run!" Tash yelled.

"Where?" Zak asked.

There was nowhere to go.

John Whitman

Zak saw Tash pick up a tree branch that was floating in the water. Following her lead, he grabbed a rock. They raised their little weapons as the swamp slug reared to its full height, towering over them.

Suddenly, a loud shriek filled the air. The swamp slug paused and growled, its antennae quivering in the direction of the scream.

Another huge creature pushed its way out of a wall of bushes and slipped into the water. Zak caught a glimpse of a long black tail covered with scales, splashing across the surface.

"We've got more company," he said Tash. "I bet that's the dragonsnake Galt was talking about!"

The swamp slug seemed to forget about Tash and Zak. It turned toward the dragonsnake as it surfaced, teeth snapping. The two swamp creatures lunged at each other.

Zak felt a hand on his shoulder. "Hurry," Hoole said.

He and the smugglers had managed to climb back onto the stepping-stones. For a half second, they all watched the two beasts thrash about, churning up the dark swamp water. Then they pulled Galt to his feet and hurried on. The growls of the swamp slug and the screams of the dragonsnake could be heard long after they'd left the battle behind.

Soaking wet and shivering with cold and fright, they reached their destination a half hour later.

The Shelter, as Galt called it, was a small island of dry ground, large enough to hold twenty to thirty small huts. The walls of the huts were made of dried mud, and the roofs were gnarwood branches coated with slime.

As Zak and the others followed Galt onto the little island, two dozen pale-skinned figures came out of the huts, their eyes wide with astonishment. Galt trotted ahead and whispered to them. They all seemed most interested in the body of Galt's companion. Several of the others took the body from Galt and hurried away with it.

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All their whispering seemed to make Platt nervous. "Tru'eb," she said to the Twi'lek, "take two of the boys and go back to check on the ship. I want to make sure none of these walking skeletons is planning to steal our ticket home."

"Right," Tru'eb said, and turned back down the path just as Galt finished his whispering.

Galt smiled. "The Children agree to let you into the Shelter."

"Thank you," Hoole said respectfully. "Galt, do you have any records? Anything that you saved from the explorers?"

Galt nodded. "Our parents left us a story."

In the center of the little village stood a small shelter. It had no walls, just four poles that supported a roof of gnarlwood branches. Beneath it was a small box. Opening it, Galt removed a mud-crust ed datapad and a tiny holo-projector. "This is the log. It's broken," he said. "No life left in it."

"Here, let's try this," Platt offered.

She popped the power pack out of her glowrod. Taking the holoprojector from Galt, she connected it to the power supply and hit Play.

The holoprojector crackled to life. A small, three-dimensional image of a woman appeared over the projector. She looked exhausted and thin. Her voice sounded weak and defeated as she spoke.

"The datapad's power supply is almost gone, so I have resisted making an entry for almost a year. This may be the last.

"Our entire trip to Dagobah has proved to be a deadly failure. Even the distress signal we sent out has failed. A passing cruise ship picked up our signal and tried to rescue us, only to crash-land as well. Now there are forty of us stuck here, with little hope of escape. Most of my original team has been killed by swamp creatures or by disease.

"We are trying to make the most of our new home. We've found an island and erected a new set of shelters. Some even talk about raising families here. But I don't know how long we'll survive.

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"Dagobah has beaten us. It's almost as if the planet resents our presence. If anyone finds this recording, get away from here as fast as you can. Dagobah is a death trap."

The hologram faded out for a moment. When it powered up again, they saw an image of the same woman. Now she was lying on a bed of damp moss. Her eyes were only half open. Her lips barely moved. It was obvious that she was on her deathbed.

She rasped: "It's been a year since my last entry. . . . We've found hardly anything to eat and most of the creatures that we might hunt spend their time hunting us. We've managed to make a home here. Just a few mud huts. Some of the survivors went ahead and started families. They've had children. That's the worst. We're all on the edge of starvation . . . and now we have children to feed. We've gotten so hungry . . . the children crying from hunger . . . that we've——" The woman on the hologram shuddered and started to cry. "May the stars forgive us . . . we've fed them meat from——" *Zzzzzkkzkkk!*

The recording fizzled out.

"She must have lost power at that point," said Platt.

Hoole nodded. "It is quite surprising that Galt and the others have survived for so long. Without food, and in this hostile environment . . . it's amazing, really."

"I'm starting to think we should get out of here, and set a course for safe space lanes," Platt said.

"I agree," said Hoole. "We should leave immediately."

"Then I've got bad news for you," Tru'eb said. The Twi'lek had just come trotting up, nearly out of breath. "We went back to check on the ship like you asked, Platt. No one's touched it, but it looks like the Last Chance was too heavy for the swamp. It's sunk about three meters into the mud, and the engines won't kick in."

Platt gritted her teeth. "Are you telling me what I think you are?"

"Yep," the other smuggler said grimly. "We're stuck here."

Chapter Seven

A short while later, Zak, Tash, and Hoole sat inside one of the primitive shelters. Platt had gone back to the starship with the rest of her crew, hoping to find a way to free it from the swamp.

Hoole and the Arrandas, meanwhile, had offered to talk with the survivors—the Children, as they called themselves. Hoole hoped that Galt and the others might have salvaged more equipment from their parents. Maybe there was something that could be used to break the ship out of the muck.

Before discussion began, one of the other Children came to offer them some food—a few thin strips of meat. It looked disgusting and smelled worse. Galt looked delighted when they turned it down, and he gobbled their portions eagerly. Once Galt had eaten, Hoole and the Children started to talk.

But Hoole was disappointed to learn that whatever technology had been left behind had been discarded. The survivors had no way to power up the equipment, and they tossed each piece into the swamp as soon as it died. The survivors had almost no mechanical knowledge.

"Didn't your parents explain how the equipment worked?" Zak asked Galt.

John Whitman

The man blinked. "Almost all the parents died when we were young. I'm the oldest of the Children. The last parent died when I was seven."

"What killed them?" Hoole asked.

"Different things," Galt answered. "Dragonsnakes. Insect bites. Swamp fever killed many. It was the worst."

"But it didn't kill you," Tash said.

Galt nodded. "All the Children caught the fever, but none of us died. Only the parents died."

"Sometimes children can be more resistant to disease than adults," Hoole said. "Your bodies probably adjusted to Dagobah's environment better than theirs did."

"Well, I can't wait to get off this planet and go somewhere else," Zak said.

Galt looked confused. "What is 'somewhere else'?"

"Another planet," Zak said. When Galt looked even more confused, he added, "There are other planets out in space. Out among the stars."

"What are 'stars'?" Galt asked.

Zak's jaw dropped. Then he realized that the Children could never have seen the stars. The canopy of trees was so thick that it hid the sky completely. They had never felt the sun on their skin, either.

"Galt, how have you Children survived all this time?" Hoole asked, changing the subject. "How did you avoid the swamp creatures? What do you eat?"

"Eat." Galt whispered the word as if it were a secret, magic spell. His eyes bore into Zak but seemed to look through him. "We eat what we can. We eat when we can. Always hungry. Always," he said. Then he licked his lips. "Mostly we eat fungus."

No wonder they're so thin, Zak thought. "What was that meat you just ate?" he asked.

"That was . . .," Galt said slowly, "that was a lucky find." Then he added, "Will your friends bring food?"

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Hoole told him that Platt had promised to bring food from the ship. That news made an eager light burn in the eyes of all the Children.

"Can't you hunt animals?" Tash asked.

"It is dangerous to hunt," Galt answered. "There are the spiders. And dragonsnakes. And the imp."

"Imp?" Zak asked, remembering his conversation with Platt. "Do you mean Imperials?"

"I don't know that word," Galt said. "The imp lives out there. In the swamp. It has strange powers."

Hoole said, "Galt, have you ever seen this imp? Is it human?"

Galt shook his head. "I never saw it. But the parents told us. It's out there. Somewhere."

"All right, I've got good news, and bad news, and more bad news," Platt announced when she returned from the ship.

Zak, Tash, Hoole, and the Children had met the returning smugglers in the center of the little village.

"The good news is, we can use the ship's repulsor lift to break free of the muck."

"Great!" Zak exclaimed.

"The bad news is it's going to take us a couple of days to rig the repulsors up to do it."

Hoole looked concerned. "I am relieved we will be able to leave. But this is a rather inhospitable environment. This may be a long two days."

"What's the other bad news?" Zak asked.

Platt frowned. "We were carting the food supply back here when two of my men slipped. The food containers ended up in the swamp. Before we could get to them, some sort of scavenger creatures swarmed over them. There was nothing we could do."

Zak's heart sank. Two more days on this planet with no food. They were going to get awfully hungry.

John Whitman

"Anyway, we'll get started on the ship in the morning," the smuggler said. "It's getting darker, and something tells me there will be even more creatures stirring around here at night. We should all find a place to sleep."

"Shouldn't we sleep on the ship?" Hoole said.

"You can, if you want to sleep in a mud pit," Platt snorted. "The Last Chance is sunk up to her lateral stabilizers, and ooze poured into all the compartments. It's going to be a mess when we finally take off."

"There is an empty hut," Galt offered. "Some of you can sleep there."

They agreed. At Hoole's insistence, Platt posted a sentry. The smuggler grumbled but did as he was told and sat in the middle of the village with a blaster across his lap. Everyone else bedded down on the floor of the hut. They all rolled up inside thermal-blankets Platt had given them, and soon all were fast asleep.

All except Zak.

Zak felt itchy. Not itchy on the outside. It was more like something was tickling him inside. Something was bothering him.

He heard Tash's soft, regular breathing beside him.

She even sleeps better than I do, he thought. *It's just not fair. Why does she have to be so good at everything?* Zak searched for a word to describe what he was feeling. Then he found it: *Jealous*.

He'd never been jealous of Tash before. In fact, he'd felt sorry for her. She was always reading books and studying while he was outside having fun, or taking apart machines to learn how they worked. Zak preferred action to thought.

But somehow, lately, Tash had managed to put the two things together. She thought more than he did, and she seemed able to do more, too.

Is it the Force? Zak wondered.

He wanted to think so. But he wasn't sure.

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Maybe she was just better than he was. Better at facing dangers like the bounty hunter on Nar Shaddaa. Better at studying planets like Dagobah. Better at everything.

A muffled voice drifted through the heavy swamp air. Zak thought he heard a second voice respond, but it was hard to tell. Even at night, the swamp creatures of Dagobah kept up a constant chatter of chirps, whistles, and croaks.

Then he heard a short grunt, and something heavy shuffling along the ground. Curious, he unrolled himself from his thermal-blanket and stood up.

Outside the hut, the night was pitch-black. Neither moons nor stars lit the swamp. In the center of the village, Zak could see the sentry's small glowrod. As he approached, he saw that the glowrod was lying on the ground, faintly illuminating the sentry's face.

Zak chuckled. Some guard! He must have fallen asleep on the job.

I'll just go wake him before he gets into trouble with Platt, Zak thought.

He reached the glowrod and froze.

The glowrod lit up the sentry's head, but not the rest of his body.

The rest of his body was gone.

Chapter Eight

"Swamp slug," some of the Children said.

"Dragonsnake," said others. "They can crawl across dry land."

"Giant spiders," argued still others.

But most agreed with Galt's conclusion. Staring at the horrible sight in the middle of their little village, Galt whispered, "It's the imp."

"Imp? Imp?" Platt said, pacing back and forth, her blaster held tightly in her hand. She had been more angry than frightened since Zak had awakened everyone with his gruesome discovery. The smuggler had been under her command, and she felt responsible. "I've seen a dragon-snake. And I've been attacked by a swamp slug. But what's an imp?"

"It might be Imperials——" Zak started to say.

"A creature that is supposed to live in the swamp," Hoole interrupted. "The Children say it has strange powers. But I think," he said, lowering his voice, "that it is merely an imaginary creature. Remember, these survivors have had no parents to guide them since they were small. They really *are* still children, and I suspect that this imp is merely a leftover creation of childlike minds."

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Platt was still fuming. "Well, it's not as if we need made-up creatures to go along with the real ones. Anyway, something killed one of my men."

Hoole remained calm. "It is a tragedy. But what shall we do? Take revenge on the entire swamp? Platt, I suggest you put your blaster away before you hurt someone."

Grimacing, Platt reluctantly holstered her weapon.

"Now," Hoole continued. "The sooner we can free the ship, the sooner we will be out of here. Until then, we shall have to keep our eyes open."

"Uncle Hoole," Zak said insistently, "we can't just sit here. Something's wrong. I can feel it."

Hoole looked at Tash. "What do *you* feel?"

"*I'm* the one with the bad feeling!" Zak protested.

Hoole put a hand on Zak's shoulder. "We have all come to rely on Tash's instincts, Zak. You know that."

Tash cast a sympathetic glance Zak's way. "Sorry, Zak, I just don't feel the same way. I mean, there's definitely something dangerous here . . . but I think that's just the swamp, and the animals. They're all . . . well, I get this feeling that everything around us is hungry. It's like the whole place wants to swallow us whole. But I don't feel as though something is *wrong*."

"This place reminds me of D'vouran," Zak grunted. Tash shuddered, and even Hoole gave a slight twitch at the unpleasant memory. Over a year ago—it seemed like a lifetime now—Zak, Tash, and Hoole had been trapped on a living planet that fed itself by absorbing the creatures that lived on its surface. They had barely escaped with their lives.

"The feeling of danger is only a small part of it," Tash went on. "There's something good here, too. Uncle Hoole, I'm sure we're safe here. I don't know why. But I know we are."

Platt sighed. "And that's good enough for you, Hoole?" Hoole nodded. "Yes, it is."

Zak bit his lip and thought, *Tash is wrong. And we're all going to pay for it.*

John Whitman

Frustrated, Zak turned away. He saw Galt walking toward one of the huts on the edge of the village and ran after him. He wanted to ask the skeletal man more about the imp.

As he reached Galt, he stepped over a small clump of grass sprouting from the mud. Out of the center of the grass stretched a single thick, yellow flower about the size of his fist. Zak barely noticed the flower until, to his surprise, it bit him on the ankle!

Chapter Nine

Zak screamed. He shook his leg, but the yellow flower held firm. He felt small razor-sharp teeth digging into his flesh. "Help!"

Galt rushed over and snatched at the flower, ripping it off. Zak felt a few bits of his skin pull off with it. Galt tossed the strange plant away.

"What was that?" Zak asked, checking the wound on his leg. There was a row of small punctures on his shin. "Is it poisonous?"

"Meat flower," Galt said. "It's not poison, but the bite hurts. Big ones can swallow a person whole."

Zak winced as he dabbed at the blood on his leg.

"The juice from the meat flower's leaves makes it feel better," Galt said. "It stops the bleeding." He plucked a few leaves and started to rub them against the wound.

Almost immediately, the pain started to recede. Zak let out a huge sigh of relief.

Then he blinked.

He had been staring out into the swamp, focusing on nothing, when a movement caught his eye.

Was something out there?

John Whitman

He looked again. For just an instant, he thought he saw someone beckoning to him. "Hey, there's someone there!"

Galt jumped to his feet and looked around. "But everyone's in the village."

"Well, someone's there," Zak insisted. "I saw them."

Galt looked genuinely frightened. "It is the imp."

"Really?" Zak said.

A rush of excitement filled him. If there really was an imp, this would be his chance to do something important. He'd been letting Tash and Uncle Hoole take control for too long. Now it was his turn to be a hero.

"Come on," Zak said, starting forward.

"No, no!" Galt said, holding him back. "It's not safe."

Zak snorted, thinking of the smuggler's head. "It's not very safe here either, is it?"

"But it's a waste of——"

Zak didn't hear the end of Galt's statement. He was splashing through puddles and jumping over fallen logs. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew that what he was doing was dangerous. The next puddle could swallow him whole, or his next step could land him in the mouth of some swamp beast. But none of that mattered. He felt an irresistible urge to move forward.

Zak didn't think he had run very far, maybe a hundred meters. His legs weren't tired. But suddenly, the urge to run left him. The moment it did, he felt drained, like a power cell with all the energy sucked out. And into the space left behind poured all the fear he had ignored for the past few minutes.

He was alone in a clearing in the swamp where one person had already been killed. He couldn't see the Children's village. He wasn't even sure in which direction it was.

"What am I doing?" he asked aloud.

"Stepping on me, you are," said a throaty voice at his feet.

Zak nearly jumped out of his skin. He stumbled backward and fell into a muddy puddle. Propping himself up on his arms, he

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found himself at eye level with one of the strangest beings he'd ever seen.

The creature was less than one meter tall. Its skin was the color of the Dagobah mud, dry and cracked with age. Tufts of gray hair, grew in little bushes around its large, pointed ears. But its eyes were youthful and bright.

Those eyes were round, and soft, and deep, and they reminded Zak of nothing he'd ever seen before, except maybe the feeling he had when he looked up at night and saw the whole galaxy spread out across the sky.

"Deaf as well as blind, are you?" the creature said. It poked him in the ribs with a little cane it held in one hand.

"Wh-What?" Zak stammered.

"Asked a question, I did. Where are my seeds?" Zak was utterly confused.

"My seeds, my seeds. Ah, here! Hiding with you, they are!"

The creature struggled to push Zak aside and get at something beneath him. Zak rolled away, and the creature started to gather up a pile of round seeds it had been collecting, humming, "Good for the soup. Good for the bones, mm-hm."

"You eat those?" Zak said doubtfully, staring at the seeds. Each one was about the size of his fingernail, but they all looked as hard as rocks.

"Eat them? Eat them, no," the creature said. He looked at Zak and smiled. "Plant them, I do. Grow and bear fruit, they will. That is the way."

"Who are you?" Zak asked.

The creature dropped the seeds into a little pouch at his side. Then he jabbed the stick into Zak's ribs again. "Not important who I am. The question you should be asking is, Who are you?"

"I know who *I* am," Zak replied.

"Do you?" asked the creature.

Zak wanted to laugh. The creature sounded silly and looked even sillier. But something about the way he asked the question made Zak pause. If there was one thing he'd learned after all his

John Whitman

adventures with Uncle Hoole, it was that appearances could be deceiving.

"A good lesson!" the creature cackled, as though reading his thoughts.

Not knowing what else to do, Zak said, "My name is Zak Arranda. What's yours?"

The creature cackled again gleefully. "I am Yoda." Zak shook his head. "For a planet that's supposed to be uninhabited, Dagobah sure is getting crowded."

Yoda made a gurgling sound in his throat. "Uninhabited, do you say?" The little creature spread his small arms wide. "Have you no eyes? No ears? Life is all around."

"Oh, right," Zak said, surprised by the little creature's suddenly serious tone. "I just meant, you know, intelligent life."

"Intelligent, huh!" Yoda said with a grunt of disgust. "What is this intelligence?"

Zak opened his mouth to speak, then stopped. He thought of the most intelligent people he knew—Tash and Uncle Hoole.

"Intelligence means learning. Being able to figure things out. Knowing how the universe works," Zak finally said.

"Ahhh," the little creature said, nodding meaningfully. "Come here," he said, shuffling toward a nearby tree. When Zak hesitated, Yoda waved his stick. "Come, come, come!"

Not knowing whether to be amused or frightened, Zak followed. Yoda stood next to a rotting log. With his stick he poked the log, and a chunk of dead wood fell away. Inside, hundreds of worms as thick as Zak's finger wriggled and squirmed.

"Yuck," Zak said.

"Rotworms," Yoda said. "Are they intelligent?"

"No," Zak answered, trying to explain. "You see——"

Yoda spoke again as the exposed rotworms burrowed into the soft, decaying wood and disappeared. "Rotworms learn that dead logs make the best homes. They *figure out* how to burrow into the wood. Burrowing, they help the log to rot, and the bits of dead

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wood enrich the soil, making good ground for new trees to grow." The little creature stared at Zak. "That is how the universe works."

Zak blinked. A moment ago this strange creature had seemed like a clown. Now he wasn't so sure. "Who *are* you?" he asked again.

Yoda nodded mysteriously. "Someone you will meet again. Now go. Others await you."

Zak started to ask another question, but Yoda chattered, "Go, go, go. Away with your questions!"

The little creature turned to leave. His movements were awkward, more like a waddle than a walk, but he was gone so quickly that Zak was half-convinced that Yoda had simply vanished into the misty air.

"That was prime," Zak said aloud. "Weird. But prime."

He turned to go. He felt confident about his directions now. In fact, the way back was so obvious, he wondered why he'd been worried. He started to jog. But his feet slowed down as he caught the dull glint of metal in the gloomy swamp.

Curious, Zak approached the metal object. As he did, he realized that it was very large. Creeping nearer, he saw that it was a ship. And when he was only a few dozen meters from it, he realized that it was a ship he recognized.

He'd seen it on the Shroud's scanners.

The ship belonged to Boba Fett.

Chapter Ten

"Boba Fett!" Platt spat the name out like a curse. "This is getting worse all the time!"

Zak had brought the news back to the village as fast as he could run. First, he had told Tash and Uncle Hoole, adding everything that had happened with the strange character called Yoda.

"Yoda," Tash had replied. "There's something about that name . . ."

"Intriguing," Hoole had agreed. "There seems to be yet another being on this supposedly empty planet. But our first concern is the bounty hunter."

So Hoole had gone immediately to tell the others. The smugglers had gathered in the center of the village to discuss Zak's news, but the Children were nowhere in sight.

Apparently, they had managed to catch something in the swamps, and were eagerly preparing a rare feast. They had even converted Galt's hut into a kitchen to cook the food they had found.

"How could Fett have followed us here?" Tash said in disbelief.

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"I don't know," Platt growled angrily. "But if I'd known that killer was after you, I'd have dropped you off on the nearest asteroid and let you deal with him yourselves."

Hoole stiffened slightly. "We thought Boba Fett had been eliminated. We had no intention of placing you in his line of fire."

"Yeah, well, we're there anyway, aren't we?" Platt said. "And he's already killed one of my men."

Zak was surprised. "How do you know it was him?"

"Isn't it obvious? Right now the odds are six blasters to one in our favor. He's trying to whittle us down before he comes in for the kill." Platt kicked at the soggy ground in frustration. "He's probably out there right now, watching us. Waiting to make his next move."

Zak scanned the surrounding trees, but all he saw was the endless swamp, moss-covered trees, vines hanging from gnarled branches, and the mist that drifted formlessly across Dagobah's landscape.

"How long before the ship is ready to fly?" Tash asked. Platt scowled. "Twenty-four hours."

"Long enough for Fett to take us all out," Zak said.

"Right," the smuggler agreed. "So we're not going to wait for him. We're going to go out there and *get* him."

Tru'eb and the other smugglers were startled.

"Go after *Boba Fett*?" Tru'eb growled. "Have you come down with swamp fever or something? He'll pick us off like fleas on a nerf."

"And what do you think he'll do if we stick around here?" the smuggler snapped back.

When Tru'eb had no answer, Platt started organizing her small gang into hunting parties.

"We could use you, Hoole," Platt said to the Shi'ido. "With your shape-changing power, you might be able to spot the bounty hunter before he spots you."

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"Out of the question," Hoole replied. "My first responsibility is to my niece and nephew."

Tash spoke up. "I want to find this Yoda."

Zak felt a pang of sudden jealousy and bit his lip to stop himself from saying "No!" He didn't want Tash to meet Yoda. He wasn't sure why, but he felt a connection with the little creature. He didn't want Tash barging in.

So he was relieved when Hoole said, "No, Tash. Remember there is a price on your head, too. You should stay here."

"And do what?" Tash replied. "Wait for Boba Fett to knock on the door while the smugglers are out hunting?"

"Tash, it seems——"

"Actually," Platt interrupted, "it's not such a bad idea. I'm curious about this little creature myself. He's a wild card, and I don't like wild cards. Why don't I send two of my boys along with your niece and nephew to look for him? This creature talked to Zak once. Maybe he will again."

In the end, Hoole relented. He knew his powers were best used in the hunt for Boba Fett. And with two armed smugglers for guards, Zak and Tash were as safe as they were going to get.

"Be careful," Hoole said. He looked at Tash. "Listen to your instincts. And do not do anything rash. I will see you back here shortly."

The smugglers broke into two parties. Platt and one of the smugglers went off in one direction, while Hoole, Tru'eb, and another smuggler went the opposite way. That left Zak, Tash, and the two remaining smugglers in the village just as Galt and some of the bony Children appeared, carrying a large pot pounded out of scrap metal.

"Where are you going?" Galt asked. "The feast is just about to begin!"

He held the pot under Zak's nose. It was full of a bubbling brown broth in which floated ribbons of fat and large chunks of meat. The delicious smell rising out of the pot made Zak's stomach rumble, and he realized that he hadn't eaten all day.

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"Come on," Tash said, tugging at his arm. "We can eat when we get back."

"Maybe just a taste," said Zak, reaching to dip his finger into the broth.

"Let's go!" Tash urged, pulled him away. Zak cast one longing look back at the untasted food and then turned away.

He led Tash and the two smugglers in the same direction he'd gone before. At least, he thought it was the same. There was no stone path to guide them, and the ground seemed to shift and drift in the murky swamp water. The plants—especially the giant gnarlwood trees—all looked exactly alike. The trees had massive roots that grew above the surface. The roots were taller than the smugglers, and looked like pillars holding up the giant trees.

Not pillars, Zak thought as they walked right under one of the huge, curving roots. *More like lots of twisted, knobby legs*. Did that mean the trees could walk?

"So what's this little creature look like again?" one of the smugglers asked, resting his blaster rifle on his shoulder.

Zak described Yoda's wrinkled, greenish skin, pointed ears, and tufts of wiry gray hair.

The other smuggler laughed. "Sounds like your mother-in-law, Traut!"

The smuggler with the blaster rifle grunted. "This Yoda sounds better-looking."

"You're married?" Zak asked. "I didn't think smugglers got married."

"Sure," Traut said. He held up his left hand. On the second to last finger was a silver ring. It was called a promise ring, and meant he had promised himself to someone special. He smiled at Zak. "You think smugglers can't fall in love?"

Zak was about to respond when Traut's eyes went wide, staring in sheer terror at something over Zak's shoulder.

Zak forced himself to turn around. Then he saw it, too.

There was a giant spider standing right behind him.

Chapter Eleven

The spider was white and almost four meters tall. Its eight knobby legs were bent into vicious hooks. It bobbed up and down on those legs, then lunged forward to pounce on its prey.

Zak jumped back just in time and the spider's pincerlike mouth bit into the soggy ground.

"There's more of them!" Traut yelled.

All around them, giant white spiders crawled out of the shadows beneath the gnarltrees. Their hundreds of scurrying feet made an eerie *thudathudathudathudathuda* sound on the carpet of moss that covered the ground, and their jaws clacked hungrily.

The smugglers fired their blasters. Chunks of white flesh blew off the nearest spider, and thick green liquid, almost like sap, splashed out of the wound. The spider squealed, but instead of backing off, it charged forward.

"Blow off its legs!" Traut yelled.

The two smugglers poured blaster fire at the oncoming creature. The firestorm was so loud Zak and Tash clapped their hands over their ears to shut out the scream of energy bolts and the shrieks of the wounded spider. Bits and pieces of spider legs flew in all directions, and with a final squeal the spider fell to the ground.

At least a dozen more scurried forward.

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"Back up!" Traut ordered. He pushed Zak and Tash behind him and moved away from the spiders. But after only a few steps, Zak felt his back pressed against the cold bark of a gnarltree.

"So much for our retreat," Traut groaned. He looked at the tree. There was a hole in the bark large enough for a small human to pass through. Some tree-dwelling creature had carved a home in the gnarltree. "You two!" He pointed at Zak and Tash. "In there!"

The smugglers lifted Zak and Tash and slid them one at a time into the hole. But as soon as the two armed men had turned their backs, the spiders charged. Through the open hole, Zak saw the smugglers turn and open fire. The nearest spider blew apart, and a knobby leg flew through the air toward the hole. Zak ducked as spider pieces splattered against the tree.

Zak and Tash huddled together in their dank hiding place as the sound of clacking spider jaws, blaster fire, and screams continued outside.

Then all sound stopped with terrible suddenness.

Zak and Tash looked at each other in the gloom of their hiding place.

"Are they——?" Tash started to ask.

A voice came from outside. It was Traut's voice, ragged and tired. "Who's there? Who are you?" he shouted angrily. Then his voice calmed down. "Oh, it's *you*. We were just——*agghhh!*"

Traut's final scream filled the air. A flying creature, startled by this last sound, flapped away into the distance. When the sound of its wings faded, true silence settled over the swamp.

Zak scrambled up and out of the hole. He dropped to the ground. All around him was the aftermath of a gory battle. Spider parts were everywhere. Green spider blood ran down the bark of the trees. Nearby, one giant spider flopped around on its two remaining legs, then sagged down into the mud and lay still.

Traut's body lay on the ground nearby, bleeding from an ugly wound to the head. The other smuggler was gone.

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Tash dropped down beside her brother. "Did the spiders . . . did they take him?"

"I don't know," Zak whispered. He pointed to a wide, shallow line that had been drawn through the mud. "It looks like something dragged him off in that direction."

"F . . . Fe . . ."

"Traut's alive!" Zak rushed to the smuggler's side. His eyes were closed, and half his face was covered in blood. His mouth struggled to work. "F . . . Fe . . ."

"Fett?" Tash guessed. "Maybe that's who he saw just now."

Zak wasn't so sure. "Traut sounded like he knew the person he saw. And if it was Fett, why wouldn't he take both bodies?"

Something rustled through a nearby bush and a sickly white form pushed its way forward. "More spiders!" Zak hissed. He and Tash started to back away.

The figure that stepped through the bushes was as pale as a spider, but it walked on two legs. It was Galt, followed by another of the Children.

Galt looked completely surprised to see Zak and Tash standing in the middle of the battle scene. "Why are you here?" he asked.

Tash explained hurriedly, "We were hiding in that tree. The spiders attacked. Someone, or something, dragged the other smuggler away. But Traut's still alive. We have to get him some help."

Zak remembered how easily Galt had carried the body of his dead companion out of the swamp before. "You two have to carry him back to camp!" he told the skeletal man.

"We will," Galt said simply. He and his companion lifted the wounded man by his shoulders and feet. Traut's eyes fluttered, and he reached out, clutching Zak's arm so hard that Zak felt the man's promise ring press into his skin. He tried to speak, but swooned again.

"Hurry!" Zak said. "Uncle Hoole or Platt may be able to help him."

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The two Children started off through the swamp, moving faster than Zak would have thought possible. A lifetime of hard living in the dismal climate of Dagobah had strengthened them until they were all muscle——thin and hard like wire cable. Zak and Tash had a hard time keeping up as they slogged their way through the mud.

They were both concentrating so hard on keeping up with Galt and his companion that Zak almost missed it——a small figure, sitting serenely on a log, with a gentle smile on his face.

"Yoda!" he called out.

The two Children were so startled they nearly dropped Traut.

"The imp!" Galt shouted in pure terror. "It's the imp! Run! He will kill us all!"

Chapter Twelve

Zak pointed at Yoda. "*That's* the imp you were talking about? But he's harmless. He's just——"

"Run! Run!" Galt screamed. Still holding Traut, he and his companion bolted through the mist.

"Wait!" Zak called.

"You could not catch them," Yoda said gently. "They know the swamp too well."

"So you are Yoda. Zak told us about you," Tash said. "I'm Tash."

"Yes, you are," Yoda agreed.

Zak wiped at his face where mud, or something worse, had stuck to his skin during the spider battle. "Are you really the imp that Galt has been talking about?" he asked.

"Come with me," Yoda said. He hopped off his log and waddled away. Watching him move away this time, Zak sensed that Yoda was old. Very, very old.

"Where are we going?" Tash asked.

"Not far," Yoda said. "Just around this tree."

Once again moving with surprising speed, the little creature disappeared around the bulk of a giant gnarltree. Zak and Tash hurried to catch up. As they rounded the tree trunk, they saw Yoda standing beneath a clump of its roots.

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Then they realized that they weren't tree roots.

They were the legs of a giant spider.

No, no, no! Zak thought. Galt was right. Yoda was evil. He had lured them into the spider's jaws.

But the spider didn't attack.

Even so, Zak didn't trust it. He backed away, and Tash followed his example. After they had taken a few steps, they stopped. The spider remained where it stood, and Yoda squatted beneath it, an amused twinkle in his eye.

"Why isn't the spider attacking us?" Tash asked finally. "Or you?"

"Why should it?" the little creature said.

"The spiders attacked us before," Zak replied. He took a nervous step closer.

"Because they thought you were food," Yoda said. Tash, too, edged forward.

"What's different now?"

Yoda spread his little hands. "I have taught them otherwise."

Zak noticed something strange. The closer he got to Yoda, the more at ease he felt. It was like edging toward a fire, except that instead of giving off heat, Yoda gave off a feeling of peacefulness and safety. Something told Zak that the giant spider was feeling exactly the same thing.

"Will it bite?" he asked, still eyeing the spider nervously. "Is it poisonous?"

Yoda chuckled to himself. "Still he worries! No, no poison in the spiders. Come, come! Time is short."

Tash's jaw dropped in utter disbelief. Softly, she said, "You're a Jedi. A Jedi Master. I can feel it."

Yoda's smile widened. "Your feelings serve you well."

"But . . . But . . ." she stammered, "there aren't any more Jedi!"

"That will be true, if the Emperor has his way," Yoda replied. Then he shrugged. "We shall see."

"What are you doing on Dagobah?" Zak asked. "Shouldn't you be helping the Rebellion?"

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"What would I do there that I do not do here?" Yoda asked.

Zak was flabbergasted at the question. "You could help them fight! You could use the Force against the Emperor!"

Yoda closed his eyes briefly and muttered to himself. "So young, this one." Then he opened his eyes. "I am here because you are here. You are here because I am here. I have something to give each of you."

Zak felt his heart leap. *Each of you.* Yoda was a Jedi and he was going to give them each something. Not just Tash.

"Tash," the Jedi said, "you must walk with me. You have searched long for answers to questions about the Force. Some you must learn in later years. But some will I answer for you now."

Yoda summoned her forward.

"And me?" Zak asked eagerly.

Yoda paused, as if he'd forgotten something. Then he pointed to the ground, where a familiar bright yellow flower grew out of a clump of grass. "Zak, pick that flower."

Zak drew back. "But that's a meat flower. I've already been bitten by one of those, and it hurts!"

Yoda sighed. He shuffled forward and reached down, digging into the dirt around the meat flower until he'd freed the plant and a small patch of mud that surrounded its roots. He scooped it up, roots, soil, and all. It did not bite him.

"Recently fed, has this," Yoda explained. "So it has no reason to bite."

"But——"

"The meat flower is like all things that live in the Force. It bites only to eat. It eats only to survive. This is your reminder." Yoda handed the meat flower to Zak.

Bewildered, Zak accepted the flower, careful to keep the roots encased in their little globe of mud. Yoda kept staring at him, so, not knowing what to do, Zak carefully lowered the flower into the wide pocket of his trousers as though planting it there. He felt totally ridiculous, but Yoda nodded at him.

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"Good," the Jedi said. He turned away. "Tash, come."

"Can't I come?" Zak asked.

"No, no," Yoda said matter-of-factly. "Back to the village must you go."

"What!" Zak squeaked, ashamed at how shrill his voice had suddenly become. "Why? I want to come with you!"

"Because these words are not for your ears." Yoda turned back and gave him one more glance. "For everything there is a reason. Go to the village. Hurry home."

Then Yoda tugged at Tash's sleeve and pulled her into the mist, chuckling quietly. Tash looked back over her shoulder at her brother. Her face was a mixture of wonder, confusion, and sympathy for Zak.

It's not my fault, her expression seemed to say.

Then she was gone.

And Zak was alone.

Chapter Thirteen

The walk back to the village was cold, wet, and miserable. Zak trudged forward, not caring where he stepped or what sort of creature crossed his path. He barely noticed when an armor-backed dragonsnake swam through a water channel half a meter from his feet. He walked right beneath the coils of a tree snake, its body as big around as both his legs.

He felt crushed.

Zak had thought he had some sort of connection with Yoda. When the Jedi Master had said they'd meet again, Zak had thought something special would happen. But all he'd done was serve as Yoda's errand boy, bringing Tash to meet him.

Tash! She got everything. She got to be older. She got to be smarter. She got to use the Force.

Feeling worthless and abandoned, Zak made his slow way back into the village.

Clomping unhappily into the collection of mud huts, Zak saw no one but the painfully thin Children huddled around a fire in the village center. Warm, pleasant smells cut through the rotten-wood odor of Dagobah, causing Zak's stomach to growl.

He was very hungry.

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Galt stood up from the fire, where the pot of stew still bubbled. "Zak, are you all right?" he asked earnestly. "I was scared the imp had stolen you away."

"He's not dangerous," Zak replied. "How is Traut?"

"We put meat-flower grass on his wounds. He is resting."

Zak sniffed the food smells. "For people who don't eat much, you've certainly had a lot to cook lately."

Galt grinned. "We've been able to find food lately."

"I guess we brought you good luck," Zak said absentmindedly.

"Yes, you did." Galt handed Zak the bowl of stew he was holding. "Would you like some? It will make you healthy and strong."

"Yeah, I'm starved." Zak took a bowl. His mouth was already watering. But then he handed it back. "In a minute. I want to check on Traut first."

"He is resting," Galt said again.

"I'll just look in on him quickly. He saved my life. Which hut?"

Galt glared into the bowl of stew. "That one," he said at last, pointing to a hut across the village. Zak started toward it with Galt following him. "But he is sleeping."

"I'll bet he is," Zak said as they reached the hut. "That bang on his head must have knocked him out."

"And his arm," Galt added.

Zak stopped in the doorway. "What about his arm?"

Galt shook his head sadly. "The spider wound was very bad. There was nothing we could do for it."

"What are you talking about? His arm was fine." Zak ducked his head and peered into the hut. In the gloom he could see Traut lying unconscious on a moss bed. The Children had pressed a wad of damp grass against his forehead to help the cut there heal, but that was hardly noticeable. What caught Zak's attention was a compress of rags, grass, and leaves that had been wrapped around the smuggler's left shoulder.

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Beneath the homemade bandages, Traut's left arm was missing.

"We had to take it off," Galt sighed. "We had to do it before the spider's poison reached the rest of his body."

Zak was horrified. "Spider . . . poison?"

"It kills," Galt said. "We saved his life."

Zak started to say that the spiders weren't poisonous Yoda had said so—but he held his tongue. He didn't want to have to explain Yoda to Galt. But why would Galt say the spiders were poisonous if they weren't?

"Will you eat now?" Galt asked.

The sight of poor Traut was enough to make Zak lose his appetite. But his body was still hungry. He felt as if he hadn't eaten in years. With his stomach growling, Zak allowed Galt to lead him to the open fire, where several of the Children were still huddled on the ground, licking the last drops of stew from crude bowls.

The pot was almost empty, but Galt scooped the last helping of stew into the bowl. The bowl came out almost full, with chunks of meat and brown sauce dripping down the sides.

Zak took the bowl and a wooden spoon. He sat down and stirred the stew, then brought up a spoonful and opened his mouth to savor the first bite.

The spoon stopped halfway to his mouth.

Then the spoon fell out of his trembling hand.

In the center of the spoon, swimming in brown sauce, was a small metal circle. Liquid slid away from it, revealing its design.

It was Traut's promise ring.

Chapter Fourteen

Zak flung the bowl of stew away, its contents splattering across the ground. The Children shouted in horror at his wastefulness.

"What is wrong with you?" Galt screeched, leaping to his feet. "That was the last bowl! Food is not to be wasted!"

"Look!" Zak said, pointing and trying not to gag. The promise ring lay on the ground nearby. "How did *that* get into the stew?"

Galt picked up the promise ring and wiped the sauce from it. "What is it?"

"It's Traut's promise ring," Zak said, his stomach churning. "It was on his left hand——on the arm that you cut off. But how did it end up in my stew?"

Galt blinked like a night creature caught in the sun. "I took it," he admitted. "When we had to take the arm off, I noticed the ring. I knew it was important, so I put it in my pocket. It must have fallen out just now when I served your stew."

Zak had been standing next to Galt when he filled the bowl, and he hadn't seen anything fall into the pot.

But how else could the ring have gotten in there?

"What is the problem?" a calm voice asked. It was Hoole.

The Shi'ido and the smugglers had just returned to the village. They were muddy and miserable, with frustrated frowns

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wrinkling their faces. They had spent the day looking for signs of Boba Fett but had found nothing.

Platt's eyes brightened when she saw the cooking pot. "Hey, smells great! What's for lunch?"

"Nothing now," Galt said. "It's all gone. But we could cook something else up for you." He nodded to two of the other Children, who trotted away.

"That would be great," Platt said. "We're starved."

Hoole glanced left and right. "Zak, where is Tash?"

Zak grunted. "She's still out there with Yoda."

The Shi'ido frowned. "You left your sister out in the swamp with a strange creature?"

"And where are my men?" Platt asked.

Quickly, Zak told them what had happened in the forest. But when he got to the part about Yoda, he did not mention that the little creature was a Jedi. Jedi Knights had been hunted down by the Empire, and Zak didn't want to reveal this one to a group of smugglers he barely knew.

Platt wasn't interested in Yoda anyway. "I'd better go check on Traut."

"Tash isn't in any danger, Uncle Hoole," Zak said after the smuggler was gone. "Yoda is——"

"You don't know that," the Shi'ido said. "One person has already lost his life out there in the swamp, and another is wounded."

"But she wanted to go with him. She had a good feeling about him, and she's always right."

Hoole's face was dark. "Why didn't you at least stay with her?"

Zak looked down at his feet. "They didn't want me to."

"And you allowed that to separate you from your sister?"

"But you said so yourself. She's always right about things like——"

"Zak," his uncle interrupted. "Tash may have some connection with the Force, but she is only thirteen years old. I expect you to look out for her."

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"Me, look out for Tash?" Zak was taken aback. "But she's older, and she's got the Force, and——"

"And you are quite capable of keeping her out of trouble, just as I would expect her to keep you out of trouble," the Shi'ido said irritably. "Zak, you must stop acting as though you are nothing but a tagalong."

Zak didn't know what to say. He felt embarrassed that Hoole was scolding him. But he was also thrilled by what Hoole was saying. That *he* should take care of Tash. That he was capable. Zak was still struggling with his conflicting emotions when Platt returned to speak with Hoole. He barely heard their conversation.

"How is your companion?" Hoole asked.

"Alive, but barely," Platt said. "These Children used some local plants to stop the bleeding, but he's in shock. I would be too if I'd lost an arm and a leg."

"I need your help, Platt," Hoole said. "I need you and your men to help me find my niece. She is still out in the swamp."

"Let's go," Platt said.

"Zak, stay here. Do not leave the village until I return," Hoole ordered, then turned and strode off with Platt.

It was only as they departed that Zak realized what Platt had said.

He's in shock. I would be too if I'd lost an arm and a leg.

An arm . . . and a leg?

"Ready for lunch?"

Zak hadn't noticed Galt approach. "What?"

"Food. The smugglers asked for more food, but now they're all gone. Do you want some more?"

A heavy weight settled into the pit of Zak's stomach. "More stew?"

"Well, there's more stew cooking," Galt said. "But we have something better."

The skeletal man licked his lips. "A nice, beefy leg."

"A *leg*!" Zak shrieked.

John Whitman

Galt stepped back. "Yes. We found a dragonsnake nest and killed one of the young ones before the mother returned. It is cooking in my hut now. If you want some, we'll bring it out in just a minute."

"Um, no," Zak said. "No thanks."

Galt put a hand on Zak's shoulder and squeezed. "Are you sure? You haven't eaten since you and your friends arrived. You'll get as thin as me if we don't fatten you up."

Chuckling to himself, Galt walked away.

Zak shuddered. What he was thinking couldn't be true. But he had to find out.

As casually as possible, Zak walked through the little village. Galt's home was just at the edge of the gathered huts, shadowed by gnarltrees. When the Children found food, the hut was converted into a kitchen. Smoke rose from a hole cut into the roof. Pale-skinned Children wandered in and out of the hut, licking their lips and carrying bowls of food.

Zak didn't want to be seen.

He turned aside and walked out of the village clearing and into the swamp. As soon as he was among the trees, he splashed through a shallow, slimy pool, scrambled over the roots of a thick plant, and found himself in back of the cooking hut.

Zak scrambled up the thick roots of a gnarltree, then shinnied his way out on a branch that hung over the hut. His weight caused the branch to bend, carrying him close to the roof, and he dropped off as gently as possible. The roof, made of gnarlwood branches and leaves, sagged under his weight, but held.

Carefully, Zak inched toward the hole in the roof. Holding his breath and blinking against the smoke that rose out of the hole, Zak peeked over the edge and looked down into the hut.

He was looking down on a pot of bubbling stew, just like the stew Galt had offered him. One of the Children acted as cook, standing over it and stirring and adding things to the mix, as Galt looked on.

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"Food," the cook was crooning. "I've never eaten so much in my life."

"None of us have," Galt said. "We haven't eaten this well since the parents died."

The cook patted her stomach. "I've thought of that last meal for years. But this is even better. Our luck has changed."

"Thanks to the strangers," said Galt.

"Is the stew ready?" Galt asked. "Check it."

The cook used a large wooden spoon to scoop out a taste of broth. She held it a few centimeters away from her face, blowing to cool it. As she blew, something swirled around in the spoon. Zak squinted to see it more clearly. Then he felt his stomach heave up into his throat.

Floating in the broth was a human finger.

Chapter Fifteen

The finger bobbed up and down as the cook brought the spoon to her lips and sipped the broth.

"Perfect," said the cook. "This one tastes much better than the first."

"He was tough," Galt agreed. "But maybe that's why they chose him to be the guard that night. He was even hard to kill."

The cook sighed. "It's too bad we couldn't get his head. I think that would have tasted good."

Zak's knuckles were white. He clenched his teeth together, trying to keep from throwing up.

He suddenly realized why the Children had started finding food just after their arrival.

The smuggler on guard duty had been killed, and soon the Children had prepared a feast.

The next smuggler had gone down in the spider battle. Then the Children had cooked more food.

Traut had been wounded. His arm had been cut off, and then his leg. Each time, the Children had cooked more food.

The Children were eating people.

Zak tried to remember the first time Galt had offered him food. That had been *before* the first smuggler's death. The Children had meat then, didn't they? But no one had died.

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Wrong, Zak remembered. None of the newcomers had died. But one of the Children had been killed by Platt. Zak recalled how Galt had licked his lips, staring at the body.

They had eaten one of their own people.

Zak stared in horrible fascination at the two cannibals. When he felt something wriggling close to his skin, he nearly jumped.

Something bit him on the hip and he cried out in pain. It was the meat flower that he'd put in his pocket. Lying down on the roof had nearly crushed it, and the flower was biting him. Zak struggled to free it from his pocket.

His movements were too much for the roof. It creaked. He heard branches snap a moment before the roof gave in; then he plunged down into the hut. He hit the muddy floor right at Galt's feet and the impact knocked the wind out of him.

Galt looked down at him, his pale face changing from fear to pleasure as he spoke: "Dinner."

A few minutes later, Zak found himself locked inside a makeshift cage against one wall of the hut. There were other cages next to his. He couldn't tell how many—the room was lit only by the cooking fire, and that was on the other side of the hut, casting shadows on his end. Zak grabbed hold of the wooden bars and shook.

Galt laughed. "The cage is made from gnarltree roots. Not strong enough to hold dragonsnakes, but strong enough to hold you. Now I have to make sure your friends are still out looking for the girl. I'll be back." Still laughing, Galt left the hut.

Zak moved slowly. If he moved too quickly, the meat flower, still crammed into his pocket, would bite him again. He had tried to pull it out, but it had nipped at his fingers. As long as he didn't jerk around too much, it didn't bother him.

Slowly, Zak reached for the bars and gave them a hard shake.

"It won't do any good."

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The voice was low and rough, and came from the shadows of the cage next to Zak's.

"Who's there?" Zak asked. The voice wasn't Hoole's, nor did it belong to Platt, Tru'eb, or any of the other smugglers. But it was familiar somehow. He could see someone crouching in the back of the cage, mostly covered by shadows. "Who's there?" he asked again.

No response.

Zak leaned closer, but he still couldn't make out the prisoner's face. He looked around, and spotted something tucked in a far corner of the hut. It was a gray helmet, battered and worn. Zak had seen that helmet several times before. Only one person in the galaxy wore a helmet like that.

"Boba Fett," he whispered.

The prisoner did not respond.

Zak shook his head in disbelief. He tried to see through the gloom to look at Boba Fett's face, but the shadows were too thick. "I can't believe they caught *you*."

The shadowy prisoner spoke. "Who are they?"

Zak said told Fett what he knew——about the original survey team, and the crashed rescuers, and the children they had tried to raise on the swamp planet.

"How did they catch you?" he asked the bounty hunter, still barely believing he was actually speaking to Boba Fett.

A grunt came from the shadows. "I arrived on Dagobah. I was tracking you. A dragonsnake was tracking me. Difficult to kill."

Zak didn't know if the bounty hunter meant himself or the dragonsnake.

Fett continued. "Lost consciousness. Woke up in here."

"The Children must have found you in the swamp and brought you here. You know they're cannibals, right?"

Fett shrugged.

"You don't look too concerned," Zak said. "They'll eat you, too."

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Fett shook his head.

Zak snorted. "Why not? You're the one in the cage."

Fett's voice was hard as durasteel. "Before they eat me, they have to come in here and get me."

As if answering his challenge, Galt and the cook returned. "Your friends are still gone," Galt said happily.

"Galt, let me out of here," Zak said, rattling his cage again. "You can't do this."

"Why not?" Galt's face looked completely innocent.

"You can't just eat other human beings. That's cannibalism!"

"It is food," Galt said simply. "And we are hungry."

"There's other food! We'll help you catch it."

Beside Galt, the cook patted his stomach. "Not food like this. Food that saved our lives. Food like the parents gave us."

"What?"

Galt nodded. "We were all very young. For a long time, we ate the food saved from the crashed ship. But the parents were dying from the swamp fever. The machines that kept the food fresh lost power, and the food spoiled. Then it was gone. We were hungry."

"Very hungry," the cook said.

"I remember crying for food. Any food. We cried for days. The parents cried, too. Then they found food for us."

Zak shuddered. He knew what Galt would say next.

"They fed us flesh from the parents who were dying from the swamp fever."

Zak felt his stomach turn over again. He recalled the holographic video they'd seen. He remembered the sick, dying woman, crying as she said, "*We've gotten so hungry...*"

The Children were eating the same flesh they'd eaten when they were young, when their parents had last fed them.

"You can't do this," he repeated. "Cannibalism is——"

"I don't know that word," Galt said. "The words I know best are 'hunger' and 'food.' I am hungry," he said as he opened the door to Zak's cage, "and you are food."

Chapter Sixteen

Galt and the cook grabbed Zak by the shoulders and dragged him from the cage. The meat flower, disturbed by the jerky movement, lashed out again, and Zak winced, doubling over in pain.

The Children, thinking he was trying to resist, hauled him to his feet again.

"Remove his head," Galt said. "Then we can drain the blood before cutting the slices."

The cook let go of Zak to reach for the sharp piece of ship's hull they used as a knife. As she did, Zak pulled his hand free and jammed it into his pocket. The meat flower bit into his hand, but Zak was counting on that. He ripped his hand back out of his pocket with the meat flower still attached, and flung it toward Galt.

As he snapped his hand, the meat flower came loose and slapped into Galt's face—flower, roots, and mudpack all at once. The meat-eating plant sank its teeth into the man's cheek.

Zak moved without thinking. He turned to the cook and shoved her. The cook stumbled backward and crashed into the bubbling pot of stew.

Zak dove for the corner where Boba Fett's armor was stacked. He scrambled to his feet holding the bounty hunter's

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blaster just as Galt tore the meat flower off his face and the cook regained her feet, the knife still clutched in her hand.

Zak frantically searched the weapon. He found the power setting and adjusted it for stun just as the cook charged. The stun bolt caught her squarely in the chest and she crumpled. The second blast dropped Galt in his tracks.

In the momentary silence that followed, Zak heard Fett's cold voice. "You wasted time setting for stun. You should have killed them."

Zak looked down at the two skeletal figures. He thought he ought to hate them. They had killed at least two people and had tried to kill him. They were cannibals.

But all Zak felt was pity.

The Children had survived for years in the dangerous, desolate swamp. They had eaten fungus to survive. Their last memory of their parents was a nightmarish meal.

But it was all that they knew.

"They deserve to die," the bounty hunter said from the shadows.

"No," Zak said, speaking the words Yoda had spoken. "They thought we were food. I taught them otherwise."

"Give me my armor."

Zak hesitated. Considering how Boba Fett had tried to kill them, returning the bounty hunter's armor and weapons might be the most dangerous thing Zak could do. But he needed help and right now Boba Fett was his only choice.

Zak gathered up Boba Fett's gear and carried it over to the cage. Fett stretched one arm out from the shadows and grabbed his weapons belt. A moment later, a small fusion cutter glowed brightly and cut cleanly through the wooden bars.

"Helmet."

Zak pushed the helmet and armor through the hole in the cage, and the bounty hunter pulled them into the shadows.

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A moment later, Boba Fett stepped into the half-light cast by the fire. Without asking, he pulled the blaster rifle from Zak's hands.

The other Children had heard the struggle. Zak could hear footsteps and shouting from outside the hut. "Now what?" he asked Fett.

"Tactical retreat." The bounty hunter raised his arm and pointed his wrist rockets at the back wall of the hut. There was a crackling sound and a spark shot out, signaling a short circuit. "Moisture damage," Fett muttered. He made a quick adjustment and fired again.

This time the wrist rocket blasted through the back of the hut. Not waiting for the smoke to clear, Fett grabbed Zak around the waist and plunged through the opening into the swamp.

"Weapons malfunctioning," the bounty hunter said. He dropped Zak, who ran at his side through ankle-deep pools of water. "Need a place to hole up until I can run a check."

"Your ship?" Zak asked.

"Too far. These Children know the swamp too well."

Fett was right. Already the Children were in pursuit. Some of them were closing in from behind. Zak had the sense that others were trying to sprint ahead on either side.

"I know somewhere we can go," Zak said.

"Lead," Fett ordered.

Zak swerved to his left. Twice before, he'd met Yoda while traveling in that direction. With any luck, the third time would be the charm.

Zak was no more certain of his path this time than the last—until he found himself running through the remains of the spider battle.

"It's around here somewhere," he said, although he didn't know exactly what he was looking for.

"There," Fett said. The bounty hunter pushed his way through a curtain of hanging vines.

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On the far side, Zak saw a tiny round hut. Not far from the hut, he could see Tash and Yoda. They were sitting at the base of a huge, dark gnarltree. Among the thick roots of the tree, Zak saw a large hole.

Yoda looked up as if he'd been expecting them all along. "Welcome."

Zak ran forward. Fett strode up behind, his helmeted head scanning the area. He peered down into the hole to make sure nothing was hiding there, then turned toward the others as Zak was telling Tash about the Children. "They're cannibals, Tash! They're eating people!"

"What?" Tash said in amazement. "Where's Uncle Hoole?"

"Yes, where is Hoole?" Boba Fett demanded. "When I find him, all three of you are coming with me."

Faster than a laser beam, the bounty hunter grabbed Zak by the hair, pinning him in place. Then he leveled his blaster at Yoda and fired.

Chapter Seventeen

"No!" Zak cried.

But the blaster fizzled and didn't fire.

"Moisture damage," Fett grunted again.

"Away with your weapon!" Yoda said, cringing. His calm Jedi demeanor was gone. Curled up on the ground, hugging his little walking stick, he looked foolish and frightened. "I mean you no harm!"

"I hate loose ends." Fett pulled a small holdout blaster from his boot, but found it covered with swamp slime.

Fett tossed the blaster aside and aimed his capture cable at the little creature. As he fired, Yoda squawked and threw his arms up in sheer panic. The capture cable accidentally snagged the walking stick, wrapping itself around the cane and jerking it from Yoda's hands.

Boba Fett stumbled backward as the cable went slack and the stick came flying back into his face. He slipped and vanished.

He had fallen down the hole at the base of the tree. The moment the bounty hunter disappeared, Yoda composed himself with a gentle sigh.

"You were only pretending to be afraid," Tash said.

"Gave him what he expected to find, I did," replied Yoda. "Sometimes that is the best way to fool people."

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"That cave," Zak said. "There's some sort of wind coming from it. What is that?"

"Strong is that place, with the dark side," Yoda whispered. "It is not a place for the weak."

"What's down there?" Zak asked.

Yoda blinked. "Only what you take with you."

"We can't leave him down there, can we?" Zak asked.

The Jedi Master studied Zak thoughtfully. "Find his own way, he must. Unless you wish to go down and find him."

Zak's answer was interrupted by bloodcurdling screams. A horde of Children swarmed over tree roots and through puddles, charging toward them out of the misty swamp.

There was no time to react. Zak saw Galt's face, wide-eyed and screaming, just before the man slammed into him. He was knocked down and stumbled into the entrance to the cave.

Zak fell backward into the dark.

Chapter Eighteen

Zak didn't remember hitting bottom. He barely remembered staggering to his feet. His first real moment of awareness was standing in near darkness and shivering with cold.

Galt was standing next to him. Nearby, several other of the Children who had also fallen into the cave were climbing to their feet.

But the Children seemed to have forgotten Zak. They were staring into the darkness, looking at something that Zak could not see.

And then he could.

Small lights like fireflies swirled in the darkness and mist. Slowly, they grew into images spinning around in the misty cave. Zak rubbed his eyes, wondering if the fall had rattled his brain, but the images remained. It was like looking at holograms, only these visions weren't coming from any machine.

"That's us," Galt whispered, staring at the largest of the images. "That's me."

Frightened and amazed, Zak watched as the visions played themselves out like a holovideo.

Zak saw the village, but it was smaller and cruder, as it must have looked when the survivors first started to carve a life out of the swamp. He saw the survivors trying to grow food out of the

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driest ground they could find, only to have their gardens flooded by the treacherous swamp. He saw the humans hunt swamp creatures, only to be eaten by swamp slugs and dragonsnakes. Defeated, the survivors continued to scavenge food from the wreckage of a ship.

The vision shifted, and Zak sensed that time had passed. The survivors looked thin and worn, but they had built huts. Some of them sat in the village cuddling tiny babies to their bodies to keep them warm. Zak recognized the woman he'd seen in the earlier hologram. Some of the survivors tinkered with a storage machine that preserved the last of their food.

The vision shifted again, and Zak saw the familiar-looking woman pull the last container of food out of the storage unit. The children now outnumbered the parents, and they were all screaming from hunger. In the vision, Zak watched the desperate parents weep as, day by day, their children grew hungry and thin, begging for food. Starving, they ate moss and fungus, but it wasn't enough.

The last vision was terrible. Zak saw the survivors, starved into madness, turning on a corpse. He and Galt and the other Children could clearly see how horrified the parents were by their own acts. What they had done was a last, desperate attempt to save their children. It was the act of beings so hungry they had lost their minds. As the parents fed their starving children, they cried.

The vision faded.

The crying continued. Galt was sobbing. One of the other Children hugged herself and shuddered.

The Children had relished the thought of eating human flesh because they remembered it from their childhood. But this vision had shown them how desperate their parents had been, and how horrible their final act really was. With a final shudder, Galt and the other Children skulked away into the darkness.

Once again Zak recalled Yoda's words: *They thought we were food. I have taught them otherwise.*

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The vision in the cave had taught them. Yoda had taught them.

"Yoda?" Zak called out. "Tash?"

No answer.

Zak looked around for the hole that led out of the cave. He must have fallen farther than he'd thought, because it was nowhere in sight. He started to walk blindly through the darkness, holding his hands out to keep from bumping into things.

"Tash? Yoda!" he called again, but no voice answered. Had they forgotten about him? Had they been captured by the Children?

Zak shivered. The cave was as cold as ice. And darker than he had ever imagined any place could be. He was sure he would freeze to death if he didn't find his way out soon.

But how?

If Tash were here, she would use the Force. But Tash wasn't here. Zak had only himself to rely on—unless he could use the Force, too.

The thought seemed so ridiculous Zak almost laughed at himself. He had never even thought about using the Force, let alone tried it. *I don't even know what the Force feels like.*

But that wasn't true.

He had felt it twice already. When Tash had used the Force on Nar Shaddaa, he'd felt a tingling sensation rush through him. Then, in Yoda's presence, Zak had felt the calm, peaceful feeling of the Force gathering around the Jedi Master.

That's what the Force feels like, Zak thought.

Remembering, he felt it again. A warm tingle passed over his skin, the feeling of a gentle touch. But what was touching him, he realized, was *everything*. That was the Force—the energy that connected all living things. That must be how Jedi used the Force to move things and to find things. If the Force touched all objects, it could lead him from one place to another. Even out of the cave.

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Before Zak knew it, his feet were moving. He no longer held his hands out in front of his face. He knew he wouldn't bump into anything.

In moments, the darkness thinned. Zak saw a shaft of gray light ahead. He'd found the entrance to the cave.

But before he could reach it, a heavy hand clamped down on his shoulder.

Boba Fett had found him.

Chapter Nineteen

"Don't move. Don't shout," the bounty hunter ordered.

"You're still here?" Zak said. Somehow, he had thought Boba Fett was gone for good.

"Still here," Fett said. "The job isn't done."

"But . . ." Zak tried to find words. "Did you see anything? Here in the cave. Did you . . . *see* anything?"

"Nothing."

"I thought—I thought maybe you had a vision——"

"Nothing," Fett repeated. "Now move."

The bounty hunter shoved Zak forward into the light. Together, they scrambled up and out of the cave into the gray gloom of the swamp.

The Children were gone, but Yoda and Tash were waiting for them. Fett indicated that Zak should stand next to Tash and Yoda. He hefted his blaster, growling, "No more malfunctions. Sit."

They sat. Tash and Zak looked frightened. Yoda smiled as if he didn't understand what the blaster could do. "Now we wait for Hoole."

"I'm here."

Hoole's voice came from the left. Boba Fett whipped his head around and saw Hoole standing there, alone. Sensing a trap, the

bounty hunter launched himself backward as blaster fire peppered the ground—from his right.

Fett rolled into a crouch and sent three shots shrieking into the swamp brush to his right, then dove behind a nearby log.

Platt, Tru'eb, and the remaining smugglers appeared from behind a gnarlwood tree, blasters blazing. Energy bolts shattered the log, disintegrating it. But as wood dust floated to the ground, they saw that Boba Fett had vanished.

"Tactical retreat," Zak guessed.

"Are you all right?" Hoole asked, reaching Zak and Tash in an instant. He glared at Yoda. "If they are hurt, I will——"

Yoda slipped into his fool act, cackling like an idiot. "Hurt? Hurt? It is I that is hurt. My home, this is. My home, you trample! Go away!"

"Uncle Hoole, we're fine," Tash said.

Platt scanned the area. "Tru'eb, run a quick perimeter search. Let's make sure Fett's really on the run."

As the smugglers turned away, Tash whispered, "Uncle Hoole, we have a lot to tell you."

"Tash," Zak asked. "All that time you spent with Yoda. Did he . . . Did he teach you to be a Jedi?"

"This creature?" Hoole asked, pointing at Yoda. "A Jedi?"

Tash looked at the Jedi Master. "Can I tell him, Yoda?"

The little creature's eyes grew soft. "Yes."

Zak swallowed, expecting to hear that Tash had learned some great secret, that she was going to become a Jedi and leap light-years beyond him. He wondered if they would still be friends after she had mastered the Force and he was still just Zak.

"He told me," Tash said, "absolutely nothing."

Zak's face fell. "What?"

"Nothing," Tash said again. "We talked about the Force a little, but mostly he told me about Dagobah, and the plants and animals that are on it. He told me how the Children had survived, and what they needed to learn. But he didn't teach me anything about being a Jedi."

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"Then why?" Zak asked Yoda. "Why did you ask her to stay with you?"

Yoda put a gentle hand on Zak's arm. "A chance, you needed. To do something for yourself."

Tash shrugged. "He told me he wanted you to go back to the village alone, to see this through without me. And without Uncle Hoole."

"A step, you have taken," Yoda said to Zak. "You need not be the best at everything to succeed at some things. This is as it was meant to be."

"You speak as though all this was planned," Hoole said.

Yoda looked at Hoole as though he, too, were a child. "The Force moves us all along our paths."

Zak shook his head. "Well, our path has been pretty crazy lately. I wish we could find someplace to settle down for a while."

"Yoda," Tash asked nervously, "could we . . . could we stay here? I want to learn to be a Jedi. Can you teach me?"

The Jedi Master looked up and away for a moment, as if seeing through the trees, out into the sky and the stars beyond. "That is not my destiny. Another student comes. Await him, I must."

"But will I ever learn?" Tash asked desperately.

"While the Emperor lives, no," Yoda said. "But the future is hard to see. The time may come. For both of you."

"Both of us?" Tash asked.

"*Both?*" Zak repeated.

"The Force connects you. Together will you grow. The path chosen for you has been dark." He looked meaningfully at Zak. "But remember the cave. Even in the dark, the Force will always be with you."

Epilogue

The bounty hunter's ship made another orbit, scanners sweeping over the swamp one last time. But there were too many life-forms on the planet. Fett could not isolate the ones he wanted.

He had decided the planet itself was too difficult a hunting ground. The swamp was too treacherous, the ground too uneven for him to bring down Hoole and the two children. He would wait until they tried to lift off. Then he would blow their engines with his turbolasers and use a tractor beam to haul them to the nearest Imperial outpost.

The comm unit bleeped. The call came on a private frequency, known to very few. Fett flipped a switch.

The voice of Darth Vader came over the speaker. "Abandon your mission. I have a new task for you."

"The job isn't done," Fett said.

"It is for the moment," the Dark Lord replied. "I'm sure you'll find this new task even more intriguing. I want you to track down a ship called the Millennium Falcon."

Beneath his helmet, Boba Fett smiled a hard, cruel smile. He knew the ship. He knew its pilot. "On my way."

Fett reached for the switch that would break the connection. He hesitated, wondering if he should tell Vader about this

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strange planet he'd discovered, about the three fugitives he had almost caught. It never occurred to him to mention the strange little creature.

But if he told Vader, the Dark Lord might send others to track the three fugitives. Fett would lose the bounty, and the pleasure of bringing them in.

He shut the comm off and set a course for the Imperial Fleet.

As Boba Fett's ship tore into hyperspace, the smugglers' ship lifted out of Dagobah's atmosphere and into space.

In the cockpit, Platt was setting a course for the Sluis system. "You can hitch a ride to just about anywhere in the galaxy from there."

"Thank you," Hoole said.

"But what should I do with the Children?" Platt asked.

After leaving Yoda, Zak, Tash, and Hoole had taken time to gather up all the skeletal survivors. It had taken many gentle words and comfort, but at last they'd gotten all the Children aboard Platt's ship.

"We'll find a home for them," Hoole said. "Though I'm not sure where."

Platt hesitated, then said, "I may have some contacts that can help you. People I've worked for in the Rebellion. Rebels have a soft spot for hard-luck cases like them."

"Maybe they'd have a soft spot for cases like us, too," Tash asked.

"I can put you in touch with the right people, if you want," Platt offered. "But the Rebellion isn't exactly a holiday star cruise."

Hoole considered. "I am tired of running from the Empire. Perhaps it is time to stop running."

Zak looked out of the viewport and into space. The whole galaxy seemed to stretch out before them. It was dark, and

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dangerous, and full of fear. But it was also full of stars, and the stars burned brightly.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go."

About the Author

John Whitman is an American novelist and martial arts instructor. He attended the University of California, Berkeley, from 1985–1989 and received a B.A. in Literature; he attended Boston University from 1990–1991 and received an M.A. in Creative Writing. He has also served as the Executive Editor of Time Warner Audio books.

He has written many books, and written for projects such as *Zorro* (e.g. *Witch's Curse*) and the *Star Wars: Galaxy of Fear* series. His most recent books include four novels based on the television series *24*, published by HarperCollins. He is also the co-author of the books *Complete Krav Maga* and *Krav Maga for Beginners* published by Ulysses Press.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.